"Who owns and controls the places in which social capital is accumulated and formed? Whether bowling alleys, football clubs, churches or digital hangouts, these assets support the flow of social activity, care, fun and friendships. They are the 'civic operating system' that fosters togetherness and provides a vital platform for social co-operation. But are we maintaining and investing in these assets?"

Across England, 150 communities are using £1 million each to make their area a better place to live. They are part of Big Local, a resident-led programme of local transformation, described as 'perhaps the most important and ambitious experiment in community development ever undertaken in the UK'.

Dan Gregory collects evidence from three Big Local areas – in Southampton, Manchester and Bristol – and asks how our social infrastructure will fare as communities brace for a looming crisis in service provision? Can our civic operating system evolve to meet modern social needs when it is generally held in corporate, rather than community, ownership?

This essay is one of a series exploring how people and places are changing through Big Local. Each essay considers the lessons of Big Local for institutions and policymakers interested in radical devolution of power and responsibility to a community level.

Local Trust

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Skittled out? The collapse and revival of England's social infrastructure

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Skittled out?

The collapse and revival of England's social infrastructure

Dan Gregory

About the author

Dan Gregory has worked for many years on policy and practice, funding and finance, charity and social enterprise. He used to work for the Treasury and the Cabinet Office and has subsequently been working under the banner of Common Capital, locally in the South West, nationally and internationally with Social Enterprise UK, the Social Economy Alliance, NCVO, Co-operatives UK and more.

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Locality is the national membership network supporting local community organisations to be strong and successful. Find out more and join our campaign at locality.org.uk

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Skittled Out?

The collapse and revival of England's social infrastructure

Dan Gregory

FOREWORD FROM LOCAL TRUST

BIG LOCAL IS ONE OF THE MOST radical and exciting grant programmes ever launched by a major Lottery funder. Between 2010-12 the Big Lottery Fund identified 150 areas that had historically 'missed out' on lottery and other funding. Each of those areas was allocated £1m of Big Local funding. This could be spent in any way they chose, provided local residents organised themselves locally to plan and manage that funding, involving the wider community in the decision-making process.

Beyond that, rules, constraints and priorities that define Big Local have been for local people to decide. By design, the programme is bottom-up and community led; there are no top-down targets or centrally-imposed delivery models. The timeframe for Big Local extends over 15 years, allowing communities to take their time, build confidence and skills, make decisions and deliver change without the usual pressures to meet end-of-year spend targets or other arbitrary bureaucratic deadlines.

The activities and initiatives Big Local areas have chosen to take forward reflect the diversity of the communities themselves. They include everything from building affordable homes to tackling antisocial behaviour creating or preserving community facilities, parks and sports centres; launching new training and employment schemes; tackling local health and environmental issues; addressing community cohesion; and providing more activities for young people. Most importantly, through their initiatives, residents of Big Local areas have collectively developed the skills, partnerships and confidence that will help them lead their communities into the future.

To help understand the context and relevance of Big Local, Local Trust has invited a range of writers, thinkers and researchers to reflect on the programme in a number of essays. David Boyle kicked things off last year with his essay 'The Grammar of Change', which highlights the potential released by the Big Local approach as local communities seek to adapt and respond to rapidly changing times.

In the second essay in the series, 'New Seeds Beneath the Snow?' Julian Dobson placed Big Local in the context of past area-based regeneration programmes, speculating on the extent to which the hope and enthusiasm being generated by Big Local is sufficient to overcome the challenges of austerity and wider social and economic changes facing many of our communities.

In this third essay, Dan Gregory explores the importance of social and economic infrastructure. He contrasts the different ways in which the needs of community and economy are addressed and poses a question – also asked by Mark Carney – of whether investment in social capital needs to be as prioritised as investment in economic capital if we are to achieve the shared prosperity we collectively aspire to.

Matt Leach
Chief executive
Local Trust

FOREWORD FROM LOCALITY

TOO OFTEN, WE TEND TO EQUATE POWER with things that happen in Westminster. The prime minister making an important announcement on the steps of No.10. An MP delivering a speech on the green benches of the House of Commons. The chancellor's budget day red box.

'Skittled Out?' reminds us we're starting in the wrong place. Real power resides in local communities. It occurs when we come together around common interests and use our collective resources to make better places and transform lives.

Make no mistake, this power of community is being exercised everyday by determined, resourceful people, right across the country. But this essay tells of a clear truth: that it's getting much harder for local people to achieve the change they know their neighbourhoods need. Years of austerity and lack of investment have decimated local services and left many of the places people rely on shuttered up, under threat or falling into disrepair.

Our public buildings and spaces are the bedrock of community life. They bring places together, enabling us to meet our neighbours, rub shoulders with people we might not otherwise run into, realise the things we have in common.

And when these buildings and spaces are owned by local people themselves, they can unlock the power of community. Though times are tough and funding scarce, owning an asset – like a community centre, a café, or a swimming pool – can mean independence and sustainability for community organisations, so they can keep on providing inclusive services in spaces where everyone belongs.

Community ownership protects much loved local buildings and gives people real control over the important

things that happen in their area. Crucially, it also helps build a thriving local economy. A recent study of ten Locality members who own assets found they had collectively contributed around 1,400 jobs and £120m of gross value added to the local economy. Let's not forget that social infrastructure is economic infrastructure as well.

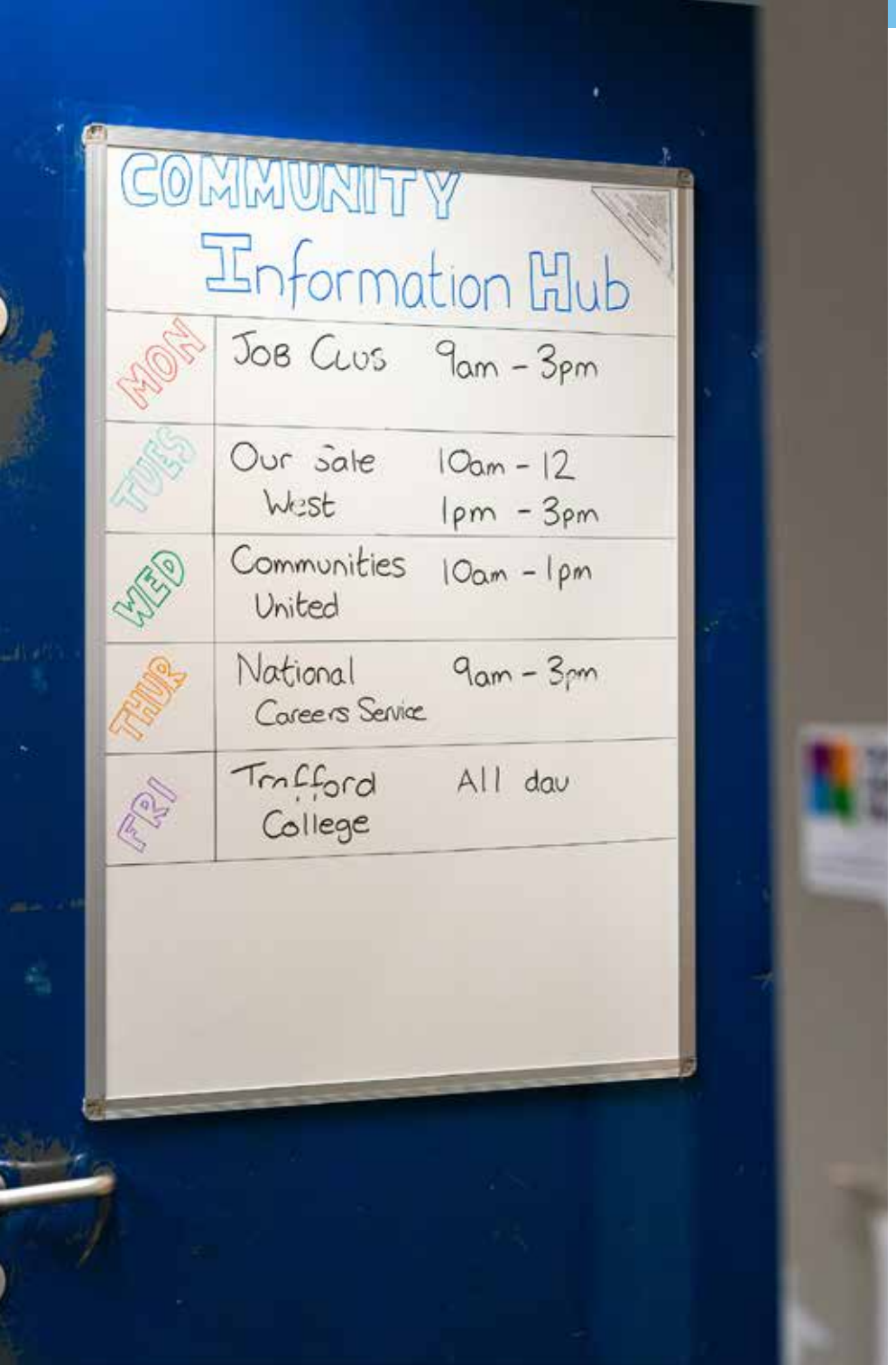
Community ownership can be difficult and some assets need a lot of love to turn into welcoming community spaces. But communities are full of latent talent, skills and ideas. We need to see the potential, then ensure the right support is in place to unlock it, learning from the hundreds of inspiring examples of where it has worked in practice.

So we couldn't agree more with this essay's call to "start with strengthening what already exists" and invest in our social infrastructure – what we call the power of community. That's why Locality is launching Save our Spaces, a campaign to save our public buildings and spaces. For all of us. Forever.

Britain's public buildings and spaces are under threat of being sold off for private use and profit. We're calling for a funding pot to help local community organisations step in to save public buildings and spaces for everyone through community ownership.

We believe this can be the starting point for reversing the trend detailed in these pages – and creating a fair society where every community thrives.

Tony Armstrong
Chief executive
Locality



PART ONE

Social action, social enterprise and social innovation

OVER THE LAST FEW DECADES, policymakers, politicians and even prime ministers have championed related ideas: from social entrepreneurship to social innovation, from social action to community organising, from social investment to community development and from active citizenship to community service. Each of these terms has been flavour of the month and each has come and gone.

Indeed, these ideas can only be pushed so far because they are *verbs, activities or functions,* which may come and go, ebb and flow. While each, of course, has something to offer, they are built upon other foundations. They are subject to momentum and money, fashion and funding. What has been missing is acknowledgement of the condition—and indeed the very existence—of the underlying structures or networks upon which social action, social enterprise and social innovation flow. These activities are the applications we run. But now we must turn our attention to society's operating system.

Economic infrastructure

The parallel of *economic* infrastructure is revealing. For something so vital to our economy and society, it's odd that the term *infrastructure* is so dreary and unappealing. Perhaps it should be rebranded as something altogether sexier and rather more 21st century. LifeKit™? Keyformz™? SystemWorks™? BaseLayer™? Groundr™? Maybe UnderWare™?

Our basic needs and our livelihoods are underpinned by this infrastructure. These are the foundations upon which our lives are built and without which our economy would collapse. While this infrastructure has sometimes been underappreciated, it has at least become relatively well understood as referring to those long-term fixed assets that support the supply of energy and transport, for instance, water, waste and communications.

The rationale in economic theory, in city halls and in finance ministries, for investment in infrastructure is that it can deliver returns over the long term, reducing pressure on day-to-day spending and making it more effective, boosting productivity, growth and taxation. So even—or perhaps especially—in a tough fiscal climate, the case for public investment in infrastructure is still pretty strong. While we cut annual budgets and lay off public servants, we still build new airports, roads and railways.

Because we know that we can't expect financial capital to appear just by talking it up. We can't create long-term, sustainable wealth only through short-term initiatives to encourage enterprise and industry. We know we need to invest properly in our economic infrastructure—that case has been won.

Social infrastructure and the formation of social capital

But what about social infrastructure? This is the trick we have been missing. Just as economic activity and so capital formation are supported by economic infrastructure, aren't social action and social capital formation supported by social infrastructure?

In 1995, Harvard academic Robert Putnam published a short paper in the US Journal of Democracy. He argued that the vibrancy of American civil society was under threat as his fellow citizens signed fewer petitions, belonged to fewer clubs, voted less, knew their neighbours less, and socialised less than in previous decades. Following media interest and several invitations to the White House, Putnam decided to turn his ideas into a seminal airport-bookshop bestseller, which he called *Bowling Alone*. This brought the idea of *social capital* to wider public attention. As Putnam explains, 'By analogy with notions of physical capital and human capital...'social capital' refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit'.[1]

Through the success of his book, Putnam became a sort of *rockstar academic* and the godfather of social capital. Yet at the time of writing, he was actually a professor of international affairs. The insights in his paper had been inspired—not by the legacy of de Tocqueville or American 20th century civil society—but by a 20-year study of sub-national governments in different regions of Italy. Putnam had observed that the effectiveness of various regional governments in the country was determined by 'longstanding traditions of civic

[1] Putnam, R. *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital*. Journal of Democracy, 1995

engagement (or its absence). Voter turnout, newspaper readership, membership in choral societies and football clubs—these were the hallmarks of a successful region. In fact, historical analysis suggested that these networks of organized reciprocity and civic solidarity, far from being an epiphenomenon of socioeconomic modernization, were a precondition for it'.[2] This is why social capital mattered to Putnam—because it seemed to enable government to work.

Some 20 years later, across the Atlantic, an obscure HM Treasury report echoed Putnam's description of social capital as a precondition for something else—this time identifying its importance, not to the public sector, but to private enterprise: 'In today's economy, investment is about much more than machines, equipment and physical infrastructure. It also encompasses the development of human capital from education and training, and intellectual capital stemming from research, as well as the development of software and improved business processes. These are all interlinked and thrive in an economy that has well developed institutions and high levels of social capital.'[3]

So there is surely a simple truth here—that trust, understanding and the bonds between us are valuable things that enable other important stuff to happen. Social capital is essential to the functioning of modern economies, underpinning good government and enabling effective enterprise.

But if we are to maintain and replenish our stock of social capital, then we must consider the structures that support its formation. Social action, social enterprise and social innovation cannot flow of their own accord: they

[2] ibid

[3] gov.uk/government/publications/fixing-the-foundations-creating-a-more-prosperous-nation

rely upon social infrastructure. This is the long-term asset that supports social action, volunteering, co-operation and social enterprise. Social infrastructure 'refers to the range of activities, organisations and facilities supporting the formation, development and maintenance of social relationships in a community'.[4] These are the places and structures and buildings or clubs that enable people to get together, meet, socialise, volunteer and co-operate. Social action and social enterprise is made possible by this underlying social infrastructure. This is not what happens—it's the stuff that supports stuff to happen.

So what exactly is this civic operating system upon which our society is run? Where are these places that foster togetherness? What are these places of assembly? Where are our platforms for co-operation? If you thought economic infrastructure was underappreciated, boy, you should meet social infrastructure. Maybe we should call it Invisible Underware™?

Of course, these places are often—but not always—buildings. They are at least structures of some kind, however, with some stability and longevity. They might be:

- civic—village halls, music venues, libraries, art galleries;
- religious—churches, synagogues, mosques and temples;
- traditional—working men's clubs or the WI, sports clubs and scout groups;
- digital—Facebook, Google groups, Freecycle, Mumsnet, Wikipedia, the press and the BBC;

[4] ABP Southampton website (web page no longer available).

- private—pubs, cafes, markets, shopping malls and bingo halls;
- public—schools and colleges, health centres;
- outdoors—sports pitches, parks and gardens, allotments and village greens;
- routes—footpaths, cycle paths, canals and waterways;
- occasions—bonfire night, car boot sales, carnivals and Halloween;
- associations—CVAs (councils for voluntary action), PTAs and babysitting circles.

What do we know about this social infrastructure? Where is it? Is it thriving? Or dying? Is it old or new? Is it crumbling? Or being refreshed and renewed? Is it shifting? Who owns it? Who runs it? Who maintains it? Are these places open to all? Are they loved or hated or taken for granted? What happens in them or because of them? How often are they used? How do they stack up financially? What does the future hold?





PART TWO

Local stories

THE BIG LOCAL PROGRAMME was created in 2010-12 to help people in 150 areas improve their communities, each with £1 million to spend over ten years.

Stories from Big Local areas can help us answer these questions about the places where people come together. In each of these areas, a group of residents has formed to decide how to spend money on things that matter to local people. These Big Local partnerships – in Southampton, Sale and Lawrence Weston, for example – are unconstituted groups of neighbours with access to a million pounds but no premises or permanent address. Each area has drawn up a plan, about how to spend the money they have and what their aims and ambitions might be.

If you look at the plans, it is clear that there is no single name for these places. Sometimes they are called ‘community buildings’ or ‘community facilities’. Elsewhere they might be called ‘community venues’ or ‘community centres’ or ‘community assets’. Others call them ‘amenities’, ‘hubs’ or ‘anchors’. Perhaps, just as the term “infrastructure” has

its problems, this might be part of why these places are underappreciated. We don't even have a good way to talk about this stuff.

SO18 Big Local area

The Port of Southampton is the UK's number-one export port, handling one million containers and £40 billion of exports every year.[5] It is a critical part of the UK's economic infrastructure—the nation's *gateway to the world*—and reportedly supports around 15,000 jobs and generates £1 billion to the UK's GVA.[6] While the Titanic left Southampton and never reached its destination, and John Lennon once struggled to even get to Holland or France, now over five million cruise and ferry passengers pass through the port every year.[7]

The port is currently the subject of major infrastructure planning and development, building on £280 million of investment over the past five years. The investment continues, as ABP Southampton Director, Alastair Welch describes, "in terms of investment, we will be spending an average of £75,000 a day on our infrastructure". In 2016, an investment programme of £50 million alone was announced to support UK vehicle manufacturers with the provision of additional vehicle-handling facilities.

Mark Thompson, Head of Asset Management at Associated British Ports and based in Southampton, emphasises the scale of investment required just to keep the

5. Southampton VTS website (web page no longer available).
6. Southampton VTS website (web page no longer available).
7. ibid.



port up to scratch: “If you own a house you have to maintain it”, he says. “You have to think about whole-life costs. Businesses are getting better at thinking about *impact costs* or *consequential cost*s or *opportunity costs* as part of a business case. Can we afford not to? What do we need to maintain? Planning for maintenance is hard.”

Just a few miles away, the SO18 postcode covers the northwest quarter of Southampton that stretches from the Bitterne Road in the south to the airport in the north, and from the river Itchen in the middle of the city to the leafier country park and Hampshire cricket ground in the east. The SO18 Big Local area sits within this catchment—a collection of largely post-war residential areas, including parts of Harefield, Midanbury and Townhill Park. Here, in stark contrast, the investment in infrastructure is not so grand.

Indeed, the city council has been seeking to reduce its role in the area, initiating the transfer of the Moorlands and Harefield Community Centres to a local social enterprise called the West Itchen Community Trust. The WICT is a sort of asset-management business, a new kind of not-for-profit *chain* of community centres and other buildings. The asset has not been transferred directly to the local community—as people most often understand asset transfer— but instead to a community-minded organisation from elsewhere in the city, with experience and expertise of managing other properties.

In practice, though, most locals don’t know or care very much about the ownership of the centres. They’re just annoyed if they’re shut. Harefield Community Centre is very much shut. A few years ago, the committee that managed it finally gave up and handed the keys back to the city council, and the centre is yet to reopen. One elderly resident complains that, “The centre is shut, but it was my money that built it. It

was my work that built it in the first place. My bingo nights that paid for it”. The Moorlands Community Centre is still going, though, with a nursery using the space during the day in term time.

Meanwhile, the new Townhill Park Community Centre, which was built to replace an old scout hut, has also gone through the process of asset transfer. This time, the owner and manager is City Life Church, which also manages a number of other buildings. The centre is arguably more of a successful commercial space than a genuinely mixed-use community space, with a pre-school nursery, office space and rooms rented back to the city council operating at near capacity. While it’s a new and tidy building and in good shape, it isn’t necessarily the kind of place where local residents can easily get together informally. So there’s a tension here between commercial imperatives—between stability and security of tenure, and retaining flexibility for more ad-hoc social use. The usage rates of potential community spaces in SO18 cover a wide range, from 0% to over 90%.

Other spaces in the area also have potential for community use. But the residents who have come together as SO18 Big Local report that the Sure Start centre—pushed by national policy—has now focused on a much narrower cross-section of the community, while local schools vary in their willingness to open up to the community.

Beyond these places, the local church and its hall have been knocked down, there is no post office or bank branch in the area and there has never been a library. There are no pubs left since a national brewery closed the last pub down with one week’s notice. All the classic English post-war social institutions are missing. The Harefield Residents’ Association no longer exists, and nor does the Townhill Action Group. Some of the blocks

used to have a resident representative, but no longer.

So the Big Local partnership in SO18 is trying to rekindle some community spirit. Weekly 'drop-ins' are held in two parts of the area, with larger community events held a few times a year at different venues, including some local schools. In June 2017, SO18 Big Local entered the nearby West End Carnival for the first time (and won first prize). The team has turned an old shop into the *Harefield Hub* with a two-year lease from the city council. Local action has placed an Asset of Community Value lock on the old pub, and it is hoped that WICT can now start to redevelop the Harefield Community Centre.

But, as things stand, there is very little social infrastructure in the SO18 Big Local area that is held and run by the local community for common benefit. As one resident says, "We want more neighbourliness and volunteering, but we need somewhere to enable that".

Sale West

Ian Brown of the Stone Roses once said that Manchester had everything except a beach. Since then, Greater Manchester has the BBC, a new transport infrastructure, Media City in Salford Quays, a £1 billion plan for the Trafford Waters development, a ski slope and more.

Greater Manchester now operates the largest capital transport programme in the UK outside London.[8] The second Metrolink city crossing opened in spring 2017 and work has started on a further extension to Trafford Park, with plans for new lines to Stockport, a loop around Wythenshawe and the addition of tram-train technology to follow. A new

[8] Greater Manchester summary



Digital Infrastructure Plan will bring full-fibre networks with no bandwidth ceiling to the city, ensuring that all Greater Manchester has minimum superfast speeds, and the BBC's northern home is to double in size within ten years. Plans for a £1 billion expansion of Salford Quays have been approved, including more TV studio and production space, as well as shops, offices, a 330-bed hotel and over 1,400 new homes.

Just a few miles but half a world away, the Sale West estate lies in the southwest corner of Greater Manchester. It's a small housing estate with a population of around 3,800, built in the early 1970s to re-house people from the inner city. The estate— formerly known as the Racecourse estate—has had a mixed reputation in the past, but seems nice enough these days and has a strong community feel.

The Sale West Youth and Community Centre was built at the same time as the houses. It's in the centre of the area and at the heart of community activities. But it will almost certainly shut down in the not-too-distant future. In March 2015, the council stopped funding youth work in the centre. The heating system is expensive and unsustainable and the building is under threat. It's owned by the council, but management is contracted out to a private contractor with little reason or incentive to invest in maintenance or development. Trafford Council tried to transfer the centre to the community but it was too expensive to take on. The land upon which the centre sits is now valuable real estate, ripe for development. The clock is ticking.

For now, though, the centre as it stands is still a vibrant place. It offers boxing training, Brownies and a woodworking club. It hosts a lunch club, the NCS programme, a summer youth club, the Woodcraft folk and a preschool nursery. It's home to a job club, wellbeing weekdays and discounted fitness classes. It hosts a credit union and a food bank. These are all services developed by and for the community without the intervention of the council.

But residents are rightly worried about the future of the building; they want the facilities improved and have ideas for new activities. As Claire says, "You have to have the building, or more than half of the services wouldn't happen". So the Sale West-Big Local partnership has identified maintaining, developing and sustaining a centre as a key priority for the community. This is likely to involve a new centre, built upon land transferred from the council and with money raised from the Lottery and beyond. The group is working to complete this transition from an old centre under local-authority ownership and management, to a new one run by the residents and the community. Ralph describes how "A building is just a building. Really, it's about who accesses it and what benefits they get from it. People would be sat at home with a Cup-a-Soup. The building is important, but the people are more important".

Meanwhile, over the past decade and more, local shops and pubs have been demolished. There has never been a library on the estate. The sports field used to be open to the community but is now fenced off. Lyn says: "This estate had three pubs and now we have one. We had a row of shops—everything that gave this place its identity. We are down to the last physical building that gives residents their identity. If this wasn't here, they would be scattered to the wind."

Beyond the centre, Sale West's residents are working on other community spaces. Lyn says that "Big Local came at the right time. It relit the fire to remind people how communities can work together". The community greenhouse is in good nick and the windows haven't been smashed. Ralph argues this is because it's in the hands of the community itself, not owned

remotely by a big social landlord, the council or a private developer. Residents have forged the Big Local plans. The team making it happen comes from within the community. Facebook has helped people see that projects have genuine community involvement. Ralph says that "communities are waking up to realise they are the decision makers".

Lyn describes the ambition for a new, bigger, better community centre on the estate in future. Sale West Big Local want to "move the building and incorporate that sentiment and identity and keep that atmosphere in the new building". Frieda talks about how there has to be "something about the new building that pulls them in. We need to make sure that in the 21st century a community centre is something worth having".

Lawrence Weston

Bristol is recognised as one of the most dynamic and progressive cities in the UK, attracting significant inward investment over recent years. Cabot Circus was a £520 million, mixed-use commercial development just a few years ago. A new 35,000 square-metre extension at Cribbs Causeway will create 3,000 jobs through a £300 million investment.[9] Amazon has announced plans for a new fulfilment centre in Bristol, creating 1000 new jobs. A multi-million-pound arena has been on the cards for some time. Rail electrification on the Great Western Railway will reduce travel times to London, improvements to the motorway interchange are on the horizon, and a new deep-sea container terminal is coming to Avonmouth.[10]

The newly created West of England Combined Authority

[9] bristolpost.co.uk/whats-on/whats-on-news/inquiry-start-over-plans-double-425233
[10] bristolport.co.uk/trades/containers/deep-sea-container-terminal



describes how it is co-ordinating bids and development plans for the MetroWest rail link,[11] better connecting Portishead and Avonmouth to the city. Christina Biggs from railway campaign group FoSBR reports that over £7 million has already been spent on just the first phase of site visits, clearing vegetation, and working up plans for the next phase. Four local authorities have come together to support the plans for the next phase of investment, which will cost over £100 million.

Christina also describes how the so-called *Henbury Loop* railway-infrastructure plans will better connect Lawrence Weston to the northern fringe of Bristol, probably costing another £50m. Lawrence Weston, like Sale West and SO18, is on the edge of one of England's second-tier cities. Also a post-war housing estate, this time built in the 1950s, it lies on the northwest edge of Bristol, bordered by Blaise Castle estate on one side and the Severn floodplain and the M5 on the other. Around 7,100 people live in 'El Dub' in around 3,200 dwellings, half of which are owned by social landlords.

Here too, the local youth centre has been struggling. Back in the 60s, this was a vibrant building, with dances every month, a dressmaking space, a workshop and a dark room. Today, this might be heralded as an exciting and innovative *makerspace*. More recently, however, the youth centre was run by the council, who wanted to hand over the reins to a voluntary sector organisation that wasn't all that interested. Instead, local residents took it on to ensure that it stayed open and services could continue.

Big Local—run by local residents as Ambition Lawrence Weston—want to make sure the centre is truly resident-led and run. Mark from the group says that "spaces are a place to deliver". So, to this end, the group now just gives people the keys and the alarm codes, which they believe instils a sense of responsibility and ownership. Some users pay a fee, but this largely depends upon who they are and the services they offer—larger or statutory services with budgets tend to cross-subsidise smaller groups. But this arrangement probably won't last for long.

Beyond the old youth centre, facilities for health, leisure and fitness, as well as advice and counselling services, are limited or non-existent. Remaining local services are delivered from buildings in a poor state of repair with limited access for people with disabilities. Mark describes how those that remain are exclusive, pursing a narrow agenda. Spaces within schools tend to be used by pupils and parents only, with PFI agreements and caretakers being blamed for keeping access exclusive. As Mark describes it, "We have lots of spaces but they are old, run down and draughty. They're not fit for purpose and the acoustics are terrible". Usage rates are pretty low. Bills are high. Many residents face complex health issues and are unable to access facilities elsewhere: car ownership is low, public transport infrequent and expensive. 38% of residents say they have no access to the internet.

There used to be a library in Lawrence Weston. Then it was knocked down and replaced with a smaller library. Then that closed. There used to be a scout hut and cadets. There were once five pubs, all but one have closed. There used to be a massive carnival too, but that died out years ago. The Big Local plan describes how 'over the past five years the estate has lost a further-education college, schools, the library, sports facilities and almost all its pubs'. The social club is now effectively a bar with a narrow membership. Mike describes how he helped build the place but has

[11] travelwest.info/projects/metrowest/metrowest-phase-1

stopped using it as it now serves only a certain section of the community. Years ago, Mike remembers people queuing to get in: “We had the best years”.

So, in response, Ambition Lawrence Weston are experimenting. Last year they put together a Christmas event on the green at Ridingleaze. A thousand people turned up. They’ve provided funding for a craft shop on Ridingleaze, for the Rock Community Centre, the Baptist Church Café, the Sea Cadets and other small groups. Other informal, accidental, meeting spaces still exist in the area, the L-Dub music fest takes place every year and the multi-use games area is being used every day by different age groups. “Let them marshal themselves”, says Mark with a smile.

The group have also made a successful planning application for a new £4.5m building on an old college site, to bring together a diverse range of activities and functions currently hosted in different locations. The vision of a new community hub for Lawrence Weston will be funded by land-sale receipts, the transfer of land from the city council, money from the NHS, the Lottery and the council. The team is convinced the new centre needs to be community-led, with the residents at the heart of decision-making, open and accessible to all, and flexible and adaptable. Mark argues that “the time for a specific space for a specific topic is gone”.





PART THREE

The national picture

THE PLACES THAT COULD FOSTER TOGETHERNESS in these three communities are often absent, closed or struggling. Or, on the other hand, they are operated commercially, at capacity or from a long way away. This is worrying. But the figures on a national scale are terrifying:

- 28000 pubs have closed since the 1970s.[12]
- 121 libraries closed in 2016 alone.[13]
- An estimated 600 youth centres closed between 2012 and 2016.[14]
- 1,200 children's centres have shut since 2010.[15]
- The number of post offices has fallen by 50% in 30 years, and 93 branches closed in 2016.[16]

[12] dailyecho.co.uk/news/15534639.More_than_28_000_pubs_have_closed_since_the_1970s/
[13] theguardian.com/books/2016/dec/08/uk-library-budgets-fall-by-25m-in-a-year
[14] cypnow.co.uk/cyp/news/1158579/youth-services-cut-by-gbp387m-in-six-years
[15] theguardian.com/society/2017/oct/11/austerity-policy-blamed-record-numbers-children-taken-into-care
[16] thesun.co.uk/news/2578902/where-are-the-post-office-closures-what-is-a-crown-post-office-and-is-there-a-list-of-locations/

- Banks in Britain are set to close a record 762 branches in one year.[17]
- In 2005, there were close to 600 bingo halls in the UK. In 2014, there were fewer than 400.[18]
- 110 Anglican churches closed in Wales in just 10 years.[19]
- Britain's 10,000 halls are facing a bleak future.[20]
- At least 214 playground facilities have closed since 2014.[21]
- Probably one in two skittle alleys has closed in the last few decades.[22]
- 45% of local authorities are considering either selling parks and green spaces or transferring their management to others.[23]
- One in five regional museums at least part-closed in 2015.[24]

What's more, these assets are disappearing in the areas most in need. Bank branches and pubs are closing in the poorest areas. Children's centres and youth centres will be missed most by those with lower life chances. At the same time, transport options for those without cars are narrowing—railway stations have closed over decades and bus lines are being closed every year.

[17] uk.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-banks-branches-idUKKCN1B31AY
[18] bingoport.co.uk/bingo-news/the-decline-of-bingo-halls-and-the-rise-of-online-bingo
[19] bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-41175879
[20] telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/02/village-halls-face-bleak-future-ageing-volunteers-dwindle/
[21] independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/playgrounds-closed-england-conservative-budget-cuts-tory-government-children-public-spaces-councils-a7682141.html
[22] telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1574013/Skittles-pubs-going-down-like-ninepins.html
[23] Heritage Fund website (web page no longer available).
[24] theguardian.com/culture/2016/jan/13/one-in-five-regional-museums-at-least-part-closed-in-2015-says-report

Conclusions

Many of the institutions that underpin social action today are, of course, very different from those of the 1950s. But we still need to care about these long-term fixed assets that support the flow of social activity, care, fun and friendships. Are we maintaining and investing in these assets? Who owns and controls these places in which social capital is accumulated and formed!? Whether skittle alleys, football clubs, churches or digital hangouts, who owns and holds responsibility for maintaining and refreshing society's operating system?

Currently, much of the existing infrastructure we still have to support social action, social enterprise and co-operation is in the hands of the public sector and the private sector. But both scenarios are problematic.

Privately held social infrastructure—including many pubs and clubs, sports and leisure facilities, digital networks, events, festivals, and health and social-care facilities are often driven by private owners and investors to pursue short-term financial rewards rather than a long-term service ethos. They are often managed at a distance from users, and they are vulnerable to the whims of remote owners.

Meanwhile, publicly held social infrastructure—schools, hospitals and children's centres— are, sadly, too often unable to work across administrative boundaries, held by vested interests against reform, stifled by bureaucracy and blinkered by short-term political cycles. They are too often subject to whole tiers of contractual, inspection and reporting regimes, complex and meaningless metrics, and wasteful and disjointed layers of procurement and commissioning bureaucracy.

So, where it still exists, citizens are too often passive observers in the design and management of our social

infrastructure—which is developed for them rather than by them, on relational or reciprocal terms. Our operating system has been put in place either top-down by the state or set up with the explicit purpose of extracting a profit. There is a disturbing absence of citizens and communities at the heart of our social infrastructure. We don't own or control the infrastructure upon which we rely, and citizens have little power to shape the infrastructure they need.

Of course sometimes we do own this stuff, but it's built for a different century or crumbling after decades of underinvestment. Often it's ad-hoc and fragile, as voluntary and community organisations live hand to mouth, keeping overheads low, unable to invest for the long term. Donors want the highest possible share of resources for good causes to be directed towards 'real work', and the minimum towards the support and infrastructure that underpins that work. Government financial support for local voluntary-sector infrastructure has withdrawn, leaving run-down assets and fragile foundations. Our social infrastructure is built for a different century through decades of underinvestment.

So social infrastructure in the UK is either dying, absent, or owned and managed at a distance from the citizens who rely upon it. Meanwhile, a crisis is looming. Financial and societal changes are now putting arguably unprecedented pressure on services. Local authorities' entire budgets could be swallowed within a decade by the demands of social care alone. Youth services have been decimated, and pressure builds on the NHS, welfare-to-work services, mental health and public health, education, the criminal justice system and local authorities. The welfare state and the public sector we knew at the end of the 20th century were built upon 19th century foundations of Victorian philanthropy, orphanages, hospices and bath houses.

But now we seem to be entering a new era, with a transition underway from planned to self-governing communities, as the state *washes back out*.[25]

So communities are bracing themselves for the withdrawal of the state over the coming years. The public sector will seek to—or be forced to—transfer onto individuals and communities a wide range of hitherto state responsibilities, including picking up the cost of services, their design and delivery, asset ownership, management and maintenance, and so on. This threatens the underlying stability on which our lives are built, and the capacity of communities to respond to the challenges they will face over the next decade.

What is to be done?

As markets fail and governments withdraw, what will be left and what will emerge between the cracks? Can we defer maintenance of our social infrastructure indefinitely? Is planned abandonment a feasible strategy?

Across the Atlantic, Diana Lind argues that 'The need for 'soft' or civic infrastructure in our cities and communities has never been greater. It comes at a time when declining social capital has left much of America divided, suspicious, and aloof'.[26] Nearer to home, Dawn Finch asks 'can we hold any of our communities together without our community resources? How can we possibly expect people to feel valued if an 'everything-must-go' price is put on their community resources? How can we expect our communities, and the individuals in them, to have a sense of cohesion if all we do

[25] Matt Leach, Local Trust
[26] architecturalrecord.com/articles/12484-civic-lesson-new-social-infrastructure

is drive them further apart? Museums, libraries, art galleries, youth centres, parks, playground, paddling pools, drop-in centres, housebound services, day centres, community centres...these are the glue that binds our communities. These are the things that bring people together and create that sense of community that makes for safer and better lives for all'.[27]

We must surely start with strengthening what already exists—investing in upgrades to a renewed, open-source operating system; investing in charities, social enterprises and community groups and the assets they make available to society. We must start from the bottom up with the organisations we already have in our communities, which for too long have been seen either as too fragile, too dependent on private benevolence, or as adjuncts of the state. We can act on several fronts...

When it comes to *funding*, grant-makers, trusts and foundations must start to think about social infrastructure, overheads, assets, capital grants and maintenance, and shift away from disproportionate focus on innovative new projects. We can take inspiration from the Reimagining the Civic Commons and Rebuild Philadelphia programmes. Reimagining the Civic Commons[28] is investing in five cities—Akron, Chicago, Detroit, Memphis and Philadelphia—to upgrade existing infrastructure to reflect 21st-century needs. Philadelphia, meanwhile, is investing $500 million—with $400 million raised in bonds and revenue from a sugary-beverages tax—in a seven-year programme to revitalise existing city parks, recreation centres, libraries and other pieces of civic infrastructure. We can attract new sources of funding from unclaimed assets worth billions of pounds. We can develop

[27] dawnfinch.co.uk/2016/09/05/v-for-volunteer-a-dystopian-reality/
[28] civiccommons.us/

new models of a sort of social PFI built around social mission, place and community, with public-interest asset locks and community ownership and control.[29] We can better support community, social and co-operative models of investment, ownership and control in social infrastructure through community shares and authentic social investment.

For *community groups*, they must ask themselves serious, hard-nosed, hard-headed questions about the efficiency of managing multiple assets and the potential for rationalisation. Five community centres, each operating at 20% efficiency, is not the answer. The youth group, the church, the local charity, the scouts and the sports club must ask themselves whether they are best able to deliver on their missions by co-operating and developing multi-purpose facilities, rather than each suffering from a sentimental attachment to occupying their own home.

Perhaps Putnam's greatest insight was that, 'The last refuge of a social-scientific scoundrel is to call for more research'.[30] Nevertheless, we need to undertake *more research* into what new models of social infrastructure might look like in future—perhaps hybrids of community foundations, the Big Local teams and development trusts, each with a local, social purpose and community ownership, underpinned by a mix of commercial revenue, endowments, public money, grants, asset appreciation and more. While we mustn't seek to create entirely new networks and institutions, we should instead seek out and strengthen what already exists. We must also better understand the pros and cons and potential of community-centre management *chains or federations*, backed by housing

[29] respublica.org.uk/our-work/publications/financing-growth-new-model-unlock-infrastructure-investment/
[30] Putnam, R. Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital. Journal of Democracy, 1995

associations or successful development trusts.

For the private sector, it is time to explore 21st-century versions of New Lanark and Bournville, building new social infrastructure into their science and business parks, shopping malls and tech hubs. In the meantime, digital entrepreneurs could develop new solutions to make it easier for us to meet up at each other's homes. We need an *Uber for going to the pub* or an *AirBnb for a Tuesday night in front of GBBO*, making it easier for us to meet up informally in each other's front rooms or kitchens. Someone might finally even invent the new library, despite—not because of—all the words that have been written about it.

As Putnam said, 'Finally, and perhaps most urgently, we need to explore creatively how public policy impinges on (or might impinge on) social-capital formation'.[31] Most of all, policymakers just need to start thinking about social infrastructure. Someone—anyone!—in Whitehall should give it some thought. We may need a national sinking fund for social infrastructure, or changes to the rules around the Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106. Theresa May's commitment to ensure that the charitable purpose of schools is delivered upon should include consideration of their contribution to supporting social action in the local community. The Social Value Act could be extended to ensure that the management and disposal of taxpayer-owned assets benefit local communities long into the future. The idea of a *Right to Try* could be resuscitated. Local authorities should take on responsibility for caring about this stuff, beyond a few outliers in Northern Ireland[32] and New Zealand.[33]

[31] ibid

[32] Northern Ireland Assembly website (web page no longer available).

[33] The Treasury (New Zealand) website (web page no longer available).

Turning ideas such as community resilience, self-sufficiency and self-management into practice will become increasingly important if communities are to thrive over the coming decades. If communities are to step up and take on some of the responsibilities of the state then they will need broad shoulders—assets, networks, capacity and capability. The state cannot simply withdraw and expect society to pick up the reins.

Encouragingly, in the wake of the Brexit referendum, rebuilding social capital is back on the agenda. As the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, says, "Prosperity requires not just investment in economic capital, but investment in social capital".[34] This is the case for investment in a 21st-century infrastructure that can support successful social action and replenish our joint stock of social capital. This is the case for social infrastructure that also underpins economic performance. The case for 21st-century infrastructure that can support successful social action, social enterprise and co-operation. The case for new platforms for collaboration, enabling people to take greater responsibility for meeting their own needs, supporting emerging models of welfare reciprocity and mutual support.

This is the case for community control, ownership, maintenance and renewal of our invisible infrastructure.

[34] theguardian.com/business/2014/may/27/capitalism-critique-bank-of-england-carney