Understanding Communities: Final Report

The British Academy | Nuffield Foundation

Contents

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Acknowledgements

Foreword

What are communities? What functions do they serve, and how? What is their potential? Popular nostalgia often harks back to a golden era when, despite inadequacies of government, institutions and markets, local communities carried people and place. Social ties amongst people, their communities and locality were an important source of wellbeing, sense of belonging, and shared sense of efficacy. For some these were tangible foundations of collective capability, capacity and control over their lives. They provided valuable resources, a sense of meaning, direction and boundaries for behaviour and priorities.

Even if this era ever existed, it is unquestionable that the nature of communities has changed and continues to change rapidly. Current debates often point to aspects of the modern era that have displaced community, its old functions taken over by other authorities, services now provided by different infrastructures, and strong local ties having been severed as people move away, turn inward or become enmeshed in multiple networks of affiliation. Meanwhile, inequalities between the wealthy and impoverished have become entrenched, further straining the capacities of places to foster or sustain loyalty and shared sense of identity. Today, local communities are less obviously sites of collective organisation and authority, particularly in comparison with other structures and organisations that might serve some equivalent functions. These include professional associations, faith groups and interest-based groups. In many cases references to community encompass merely places where people live, defined only in terms of geographical or administrative separation from other places but with no particular role in lifting people or establishing a shared sense of belonging.

Yet, just when communities seem to have waned as significant sites of social formation, a policy expectation has grown that they could provide people - especially those who are most disadvantaged – with affective and cultural mooring, and the social capital with which opportunity can be grasped. In the decades of post-war growth markets, states, institutions and civic organisations came to do the heavy lifting, relieving local communities of the burden of empowering their members, ensuring social cohesion, providing carrying capacity. In latter decades, however, this deferred responsibility eroded under growing fiscal strains, policy departure from universal protections, and market bias towards the better-off. Austerity has inevitably eroded local services and curtailed funding for public and civic bodies. Consequently, the most structurally vulnerable people and places have increasingly been left to their own devices. So while aspirations of betterment through community empowerment have been raised, and sporadically funded, by remote policymakers, there are places where people's social worlds have been diminishing or been stripped of the physical and social resources that are necessary for community empowerment to happen.

Yet it is essential to differentiate the policy aspiration from any failures of implementation. Even policy framing has sometimes glossed over problematic effects of government disengagement the aspiration is rooted in a desire for something unique and better from communities. Rather than resigning ourselves to dissolution of communities and loss of their societal value, it is more urgent than ever to understand what is possible for communities to do for themselves when given the right forms of support. From history and recent evidence we know what can be achieved. It is possible to enable social ties, strong senses of place, communities of care, appropriate social centres and civic associations, effective services and infrastructures, and shared cultures that embrace individual members. Rather than seeing these as a past of no return, we observe a history of place that enabled people to find their way through adversity, overcome isolation, and feel part of something bigger. Community can be a critical social resource that can and should be mobilised. Present and future communities may be constituted differently from those of the past but some of the same elements will continue to be critically important. Discerning these, as well as new and prospective, features is fundamental for understanding how to establish a coherent strategy of support for places that appear to have been stripped bare of opportunity, resource and institutional capacity. And while the need to understand local communities and their potentiality is most

pressing in hollowed out places (where they are expected to drive local regeneration), it is also fundamental for sustaining and ensuring the continued success of those that are currently in better shape but which can also face growing and acute challenges.

This report synthesises the findings of a set of detailed studies of communities facing an array of complex strains, funded under a joint programme of the British Academy and Nuffield Foundation. It examines the terms on which communities come together or not, and what this means for individual and social empowerment. It looks across the six studies to identify the salient conditions likely to sustain or diminish community - the quality of the fabric of social connection, public provisioning, common space, civic organisation, trust and crucial intermediaries. The report offers an array of policy recommendations for local and central government to reinforce more positive conditions. It urges caution in the application of one-size-fits-all formulae for interventions and emphasises the value of recognising local specificities. It is essential to work closely with communities and civic organisations, accepting that the capacity to generate and create activity through local social ties is only possible if accompanied by well-designed and effectively functioning infrastructures, services and shared spaces. The broad as well as fine-grained observations and recommendations of the report – and the individual studies themselves – add valuable insight to current policy interest in places and community empowerment.

Professor Dominic Abrams and Professor Ash Amin,
Co-Chairs of Understanding Communities

Executive summary

Understanding Communities was a joint research programme of the British Academy and Nuffield Foundation with the aim to increase understanding of how communities function and how they can improve people's lives. Six projects were funded, all of which focused on research which would generate findings for making a practical difference, and address the absence of lived experience in the current evidence base.

This report has brought together findings from across these projects under four thematic chapters, which discuss the potential ways in which we can shape and improve the future resilience of communities:

- **Place** highlights the importance of locally relevant approaches to policy, and how hyperlocal services and organisations are often highly valued by the communities they serve.
- **Trust** explores how trust is a vital part of building and maintaining social connections, and delivering services, and considers factors that help to develop and sustain trust.
- **Connection** discusses what enables people to feel more connected with each other, and the contribution and limitations of digital technology.
- **Community capacity** shows how a lack of infrastructure and public sector capacity adversely affects communities and discusses how, with the right government support, communities can enhance individual and local capacity.

All six projects developed recommendations for policymakers. This report brings them together into a set of messages which can improve the conditions for communities; and centre them in the design, implementation and delivery of policies which affect them.

For local authorities, the top-level policy messages are:

1. Prioritise long-term investment into community spaces and key personnel of community projects.
2. Co-design services and spaces with communities.
3. Deliver services through local organisations where appropriate.

For central government, the top-level policy messages are:

1. Improve approaches to funding communities to better support the development and maintenance of conditions needed for them to thrive.
2. Provide guidance to local bodies which prioritises strengthening communities.
3. Proceed with plans to make it easier for communities to acquire local assets.

Introduction

Understanding Communities was a joint research programme of the British Academy and Nuffield Foundation which aimed to increase collective understanding of how communities 'rooted in place' function and how they can improve people's lives, recognising that local experiences are situated within much wider contexts. [1,2] It brought together researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to generate research focused on making a practical, positive difference, and addressing the 'absence of lived experience from our evidence base'.[3] All research teams who applied were expected to 'strongly consider ways to account for lived experience, and the potential for co-production', and this is reflected in the approaches of the six projects the programme funded.[4]

This report synthesises the key findings and policy implications of the resulting research produced across all six projects for national and local policymakers, major funders of community activities and infrastructure, and those interested in communities more widely.

The research context

Understanding Communities engages with multiple overlapping concepts from the field of community studies and beyond. Over the last 20 years, the use of 'community' as a term within policy discourse on economic and social renewal and social cohesion has grown significantly. This has accelerated in recent years through political agendas such as 'Levelling Up', an increased awareness of the role of community infrastructure in national resilience after the Covid-19 pandemic, and in response to growing civil unrest seen most notably in the anti-immigration riots of summer 2024. In such policy responses, the actual meanings, workings, and contexts of 'community' have often been loosely defined. This report reveals, from the funded research, key functional aspects of community that policies seeking to draw on local social ties for renewal and cohesion should be alert to.

The conditions identified for communities to survive, and ultimately thrive, echo but also sharpen and add texture to established claims in the research literature regarding:

- Social and cultural infrastructure – the often community-led and sometimes 'accidental' spaces, services and structures that enable people to come together, build trust and join in, such as schools, libraries and parks, from which social capital can then develop.[5,6,7] This infrastructure has to be accessible and inclusive if it is to build social cohesion.

- Social capital – the relationships and social networks that enable access to support, resources and opportunities – including those between close friends and family members ('bonding capital'), with people outside immediate networks ('bridging capital'), and between people in groups/institutions at different power levels ('linking capital').[8,9,10, 11]

1   British Academy and Nuffield Foundation Collaboration on Understanding Communities guidance notes | The British Academy
2   Amin, A. (2021), Communities and place matter for social well-being - Nuffield Foundation, 25.03.21
3   Goulden, H. (2021), Strengthening communities through collaboration - Nuffield Foundation, 06.05.21
4   British Academy and Nuffield Foundation Collaboration on Understanding Communities guidance notes | The British Academy
5   The British Academy and Power to Change (2022), 'Space for Community: Strengthening our Social Infrastructure' https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/space-for-community-strengthening-our-social-infrastructure/, p. 6.
6   Klinenberg, E. (2018), Palaces for the People: How To Build a More Equal and United Society, Bodley Head.
7   The British Academy (2024), 'Social and Cultural Infrastructure for People and Policy: Discussion Papers', https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/social-and-cultural-infrastructure-for-people-and-policy-discussion-papers/
8   Putnam, R.D. (1995), 'Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital.' Journal of Democracy 6, no. 1 (1995): 65-78. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.1995.0002
9   Harris et al (2025), Social capital in the United Kingdom: evidence from six billion friendships | BIT, 24.03.25, https://www.bi.team/publications/social-capital-in-the-united-kingdom/
10   Demos (2025) Social-Capital-2025_The-Hidden-Wealth-of-Nations.pdf
11   Davies, B., Abrams, D., Horsham, Z. et al. (2024), 'The Causal Relationship Between Volunteering and Social Cohesion: A Large Scale Analysis of Secondary Longitudinal Data.' Soc Indic Res 171, 809–825. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-023-03268-6

- Social cohesion – which encompasses feeling connected as a society as well as more personal connections. Social cohesion is undermined by 'drivers of division' including economic and racial inequalities.[12]
- Wellbeing – a positive state of being that can be used to refer to the experiences of individuals and communities which can be measured in different ways, for example through 'indirect' measures like income or life expectancy, or subjective 'direct' measures such as how people behave or describe how they feel.
- Resilience – the factors that can protect individual and community wellbeing and allow quicker recovery from the worst outcomes of disruptive events such as natural disasters, pandemics and economic crises.
- Place-based or place-sensitive approaches – policymaking that recognises and responds to the diversity of places and their contexts.

The underlying context for many of the communities involved in the Understanding Communities projects was challenging and these conditions were often structurally strained. As shown in Table 1, the research involved a diversity of local communities in all four nations of the UK: in cities, towns, villages and remote rural areas, inland and on the coast. Each of these places, and the communities within them, had their own unique history, relationship to the surrounding physical geography, current issues and opportunities, but they shared some common challenges too. Services and systems were under pressure or absent altogether, physical community spaces had often been lost, and there were widespread inequalities. Communities were acting in many different ways to provide support, bring diverse people together, and improve conditions. But they were hampered by a lack of resources and a severely stretched public sector. The research evidence reveals how local and central government can better support their efforts through long-term and multi-scalar interventions ranging from neighbourhood-level approaches to large-scale infrastructure and data solutions.

Insights from the research

The evidence presented here is not intended to be representative but draws on converging insights from a set of strong case studies, each nested in a wider body of literature, survey, and expertise. It coalesces around four critical themes for shaping the future potential of resilient communities, set out in turn in this report.[13]

- **Place** highlights the importance of locally relevant approaches to policy, and how hyperlocal services and organisations are often highly valued by communities.[14]
- **Trust** explores how trust is a vital part of building and maintaining social connections, and delivering services, and considers factors that help to develop and sustain trust.
- **Connection** discusses what enables people to feel more connected with each other, and the contribution and limitations of digital technology.
- **Community capacity** shows how a lack of infrastructure and public sector capacity adversely affects communities and discusses how, with the right government support, communities can enhance individual and local capacity.

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12   Abrams, D. (2021), 'Beyond Us and Them - Societal Cohesion in Britain Through Eighteen Months of COVID-19', Nuffield Foundation, p. 8.
13   The themes were initially developed during a conference for the Understanding Communities programme in November 2024, once the projects had completed. The six projects presented their findings, and researchers, practitioners and policymakers reflected on the implications of the research evidence for local and national policy during workshop sessions. The themes were then further refined by the Understanding Communities team based on detailed evidence from the final reports.
14   Hyperlocal refers to a very small geographical area such as a village, neighbourhood or suburb.

The research projects

Six research proposals received a total of £1.1 million, and the projects ran from 2022-2025.[15] At the same time, the Institute for Community Studies gathered insights about the research methods and experiences of the communities involved. Their report contains useful learnings for researchers.[16]

Table 1 overleaf gives a brief overview of the six projects and provides shorthand names that are used throughout the report. Project summaries, contained within Appendix B, provide more information about each project's motivation, method, findings and conclusions, together with a link to their detailed final report.[17] Further details of the programme organisation and strategy are in Appendix A.

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15   £1.1m for research strengthening communities' role in securing well-being - Nuffield Foundation.
16   Institute for Community Studies (2025) Understanding Communities Final Insight Report.
17   These summaries also contain a brief description of the case study areas involved in each project, but are not intended to give comprehensive information about demographic or other characteristics. For example, we note where case study areas are ethnically diverse; this is a broad term which includes areas with historically and very long-standing ethnically diverse populations, as well as areas where diversity has increased relatively recently. Each project's final report should be referred to for a greater level of detail.

Table 1: Research projects funded by the Understanding Communities programme

Project title	Motivation	Research team	Study areas	Methods
Nature-based Integration: connecting communities with/in nature	To examine how nature can help social integration between different communities, including people with and without migrant backgrounds, refugees, and asylum seekers.	Dr Azadeh Fatehrad (Kingston University); Dr Davide Natalini (Anglia Ruskin University); Dr Hyab Yohannes (University of Glasgow); Gianluca Palombo (Anglia Ruskin University).	Haringey (London); Blackburn with Darwen (North West England); Outer Herbides / Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Scotland).	Literature review; creation and analysis of a database of nature-engaged initiatives in the UK; participatory mapping with local residents led by community researchers; four arts-based workshops followed by analysis of artworks and interviews with some artists.
Rural Assets: policy and practice insights from the devolved nations	To explore how community asset acquisition – the process by which community organisations gain ownership of publicly owned land or buildings – impacts on rural communities.	Dr Danielle Hutcheon (Glasgow Caledonian University); Dr Sarah Nason (Bangor University); Dr Bobby Macaulay (University of the Highlands & Islands); Dr Margaret Currie (James Hutton Institute); Dr Davide Natalini (Anglia Ruskin Institute); John Hallett (CommunityThinking.org); Kieran Sinclair (Glasgow Caledonian University); Richard Osterhus (Derry & Strabane District Council).	Lancashire (North West England); The Highlands (Scotland); Powys (Wales); County Antrim (Northern Ireland).	In-depth interviews with community members, public authority representatives and key stakeholder in each case study area; co-produced activities within each community such as storytelling events and consultations; knowledge exchange events in each nation.
Beyond School Gates: children's contribution to community integration	To investigate the role of children in building connections within communities between people of different ethnicity, faith or linguistic background, and consider how policy could best support this.	Dr Ronke Adeyanju (University of Kent); Dr Lindsey Cameron (University of Kent); Dr Jocelyn Dautel (Queens University Belfast); Magdalena Dujczynski (Middlesex University); Dr Charlotte Haberstroh (Kings College London); Meg Henry (The Linking Network); Dr Lorien Jasny (University of Exeter); Helen King (University of Newcastle); Dr Emily Murphy (University of Newcastle); Dr Mona Sakr (Middlesex University).	Bolton, Blackburn with Darwen and Preston (North West England).	Surveys and qualitative interviews with primary school children and their parents; interviews with stakeholders in local authorities, local schools, faith organisations and third sector; development and analysis of a reading and creativity programme for children; mapping and analysis of children's friendship networks; community workshops.

Project title	Motivation	Research team	Study areas	Methods
The role of communities and connections in **Social Welfare Legal Advice**	To examine how people living in different areas access social welfare legal advice (e.g. for benefits, debt, employment, housing, immigration and social care) and how advice-seeking relates to individual and community characteristics.	Dr Sarah Nason (Bangor University); Dr Peter Butcher (Bangor University); Lindsey Poole (Advice Services Alliance); Faith Osifo (Advice Services Alliance); Dr Lorien Jasny (University of Exeter); Susanne Hughes (University of Exeter); Dr Susanne Martikke (Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation); Dr Sara Closs-Davies (University of Manchester).	Rochdale (North West England); Isle of Anglesey (Wales); South Hams (South West England); Hackney (London).	Literature review; workshops and discussions with local advice and community organisations and key individuals such as councillors; semi-structured interviews with residents; social network analysis.
Transformative Justice, women with convictions and uniting communities	To explore whether an arts-based approach to justice could enhance connections within communities more widely and help women with convictions reconnect with their local communities.	Professor Tirion Havard (London South Bank University); Dr Sarah Bartley (The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama); Dr Ian Mahoney (Nottingham Trent University); Dr Chris Magill (University of Brighton); Professor Chris Flood (London South Bank University).	Stoke-on-Trent (West Midlands).	Literature review; focus groups with women who received custodial sentences and with women who are survivors of domestic abuse; interviews with experts; creative workshops leading to an artistic installation; arts-based community event.
Using **Administrative Data** to understand community well-being	To investigate the potential for local authorities to use existing administrative data and artificial intelligence to understand more about place-based community well-being.	Professor Lasana Harris (University College London); Dr Nonso Nnamoko (Edgehill University); Dr Saffron Woodcraft (University College London); Dr Saite Lu (University of Cambridge); Dr Jose Gana (University College London); Jack Procter (University College London and Edgehill University); Mrinal Chaudhary (University College London).	Camden (London), UK-wide.	Literature review; workshops with expert and community stakeholders; creation of an algorithm to measure community well-being; development of a 'proof-of-concept' community well-being index and dashboard.

Place

Key messages:

- Understanding local context such as a place's demography, geography and history is crucial for providing support to communities.
- Local identity and pride can be leveraged to strengthen a community, if the project is effectively informed by and embedded within that context.
- Physical community spaces and in-person services are integral to developing and strengthening connections between residents.

Prior research led us to expect that places and their specific contexts would play a central role in the research and so the programme aimed to investigate the nature of the attributes and assets of communities that are rooted in place, aligning with place-based approaches used by policymakers.[18]

The programme incorporated a diverse range of places and communities across the United Kingdom. Across these, the projects revealed ways that place and context were important to understanding how these different communities worked and what they needed in order to thrive. Some of the projects identified communities within a place that were brought together by shared values and experiences - including histories and memories of place or an appreciation of nature. Some research teams worked with communities of shared characteristics, such as religion or ethnicity, while others revealed the importance of physical spaces for connecting people and for facilitating the provision of in-person services that reflect and respond to local need. They also found a clear demand for hyperlocal provision to reinforce these local conditions, cautioning against interventions focusing solely on the local.

Understanding the local context is essential to providing communities with the right support

The programme emphasised the need for place-sensitive approaches, showing how local characteristics shape the challenges and needs faced by residents.[19] In developing a 'community wellbeing index', *Administrative Data* highlighted the multiple, context-specific contributors that needed to be considered across a range of behavioural administrative datasets, including factors such as public transport usage, crime rates, and voter turnout.[20]

Communities in geographically remote areas may face challenges that are distinctive from those in other settings, exemplified by *Rural Assets*, which identified specific threats including public service withdrawal, affordable housing shortages and the outmigration of youth. Even ensuring engagement and participation in the research from community members across dispersed geographies, such as the Highlands, was challenging.

The impact of public service withdrawal in some areas was also cited as a pivotal factor in determining whether communities were able to access support for their problems.

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18   British Academy and Nuffield Foundation Collaboration on Understanding Communities guidance notes <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/funding/british-academy-nuffield-foundation-understanding-communities/guidance-notes/> . See also, the British Academy's Sustainable Futures theme, particularly the 'Where We Live Next' programme, which focuses on place and place-sensitive policymaking <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/where-we-live-next/>

19   Social Welfare Legal Advice, Final Report, p. 48.

20   Administrative Data, Draft Report, p. 7, p. 24 & p.26.

Social Welfare Legal Advice reported how certain communities found it very difficult to access meaningful support from their local authorities due to systemic inconsistencies that 'passed them from pillar to post' when attempting to access services.[21]

Local demography also matters. Focusing on three towns in the North West of England with high levels of ethnic diversity and similar migration histories, *Beyond School Gates* highlighted the extent to which 'local communities enable connections across differences in ethnicity, faith and linguistic background', with an important role played by schools and children in facilitating these.[22]

Local identity is an important component in understanding place

Local identity and pride in place can be a vital means of strengthening community cohesion and resilience. In Stoke-on-Trent, *Transformative Justice* found that 'a strong sense of identity and pride within the city' was balanced against a shared set of challenges amongst their participants, 'most notably trauma and loss'.[23] The project also revealed that this 'shared sense of history' amongst people within a community can be a powerful means of building 'empathy and belonging', enabling them to connect with one another based on their geographical and social identities, including through the collective memories of the area where they live.[24]

There were similar findings in *Social Welfare Legal Advice*, highlighting the cultural inflections of particular community spaces, such as pubs and community centres from which legal advice services could be operated. The project showed how language and culture can help to negotiate conflict and exclusion.[25] For example, the Iorwerth Arms – a community-owned pub in Bryngwran, Anglesey – doubled as a gateway to services available bilingually in Welsh and English. The project concluded that 'locally based organisations' that are 'sensitive to culture, identity and language, such as the Iorwerth Arms, are central to community wellbeing'.[26]

Similarly, the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides — one of the areas examined by *Nature-based Integration* — is home to a community that is 'deeply connected to Scottish heritage and practices like crofting, with religion playing a central role in local identity.'[27] The project also found the sensory experience of nature to 'evoke memories and cultural expression and celebration of heritage', nurturing connections to place also among migrant communities that may not immediately identify with the culture and heritage of their resettled home.[28] Nature-related rituals and traditions, storytelling and folklore were found to be powerful tools for helping to connect diverse community members with one another and with the natural world.

Physical community spaces are important for building connection between residents

Across the programme, research findings emphasised the importance of communal spaces as sites of connection and cohesion. Community hubs of various kinds were found to be central to delivering certain services, connecting people struggling to find relevant advice services, and enabling women with convictions to reconnect with their communities.[29] Community acquisition of public spaces was seen to be of particular significance in some places, especially low-income areas, where residents benefitted from the opportunity to develop their own facilities and programmes of activities.

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21   Social Welfare Legal Advice, Final Report, p. 71.
22   Beyond the Schools Gates, Final Report, p. 8.
23   Transformative Justice, Final Report, p. 6.
24   Transformative Justice, Final Report, p. 10.
25   Social Welfare Legal Advice, Final Report, p.34
26   Social Welfare Legal Advice on Anglesey, Full Report and Executive Summary, p. 76.
27   Nature-Based Integration, p.9.
28   Nature-Based Integration, p. 35.
29   See Transformative Justice, Final Report, pp. 10-11.

We have already mentioned, with the example of Iorwerth Arms, the salience of shared history and memory in particular communal spaces. Similarly, the workshops organised by *Transformative Justice* took place in Fenton Town Hall, formerly the site of a magistrates' court that is now an 'important community hub'.[30] The space held particular significance for some participants who had 'spent time in Fenton Town Hall while it was serving as a magistrates' court' and the researchers noted that the shared sense of history attached to the space helped to build empathy and a sense of belonging amongst the group they were working with.[31]

Publicly accessible green spaces are another enabler of community cohesion across cultural and religious boundaries. *Beyond School Gates* found that 'public spaces that children can access for free are particularly important for supporting connections across difference', leading to 'positive social interactions… between individuals of different ethnicity, faith or linguistic background'.[32] Similarly, *Nature-based Integration* revealed how public green spaces can foster a sense of belonging and 'nurture connections to place' especially where there is a positive connection to local cultural heritage.[33]

Local geography also plays its part. The use of nature-based integration is only plausible as an intervention if natural environments such as parks, rivers and woodlands are nearby or easily accessible by affordable and reliable public transport provision.[34]

Often physical community spaces are set up in ways that that do not facilitate, or may inhibit cohesion. *Beyond School Gates* noted that public spaces could only play a greater role in community integration if people from diverse backgrounds are welcomed and encouraged to use them in ways that meet their needs.[35] Likewise, *Nature-based Integration* found that aesthetic appeal alone may not encourage the use of natural environments in ways which foster integration, requiring also effort to make these environments safe and usable in ways that encourage social interaction, for example, by allowing picnics, sports and play activities that appeal to a wider constituency.[36]

30   Transformative Justice, Final Report, p. 23.
31   Transformative Justice, Final Report, p. 36.
32   Beyond School Gates, Final Report, p. 6.
33   See Nature-based Integration, Final Report.
34   See Nature-based Integration, Final Report.
35   Beyond the School Gates, Final Report.
36   Nature-based Integration, Final Report, p.15.

Trust

Key messages:

- Trust is an essential enabler of social cohesion within and between communities.
- Hyperlocal provision is more trusted by communities due to its accessibility and familiarity. This also makes it effective for building trust within and across communities.
- Trust can be eroded quickly due to poor experiences with public sector services, especially when significant distances are involved.

Trust was found to be an important element for building the social relationships and connections which underlie social cohesion – those within and between communities, and between individuals, organisations, and public services. Policymakers should always be aware of how their actions and statements affect trust: developing trust takes time, it is linked to how people's voices are heard and who is listened to, and negative experiences can lead to feelings of mistrust that undermine these connections.

They should also appreciate that trust is relational, dynamic, and tied to public infrastructure. It can be affected by changes in the type and depth of challenges faced by individuals and areas, changes and cuts in public service delivery, and shifts in overall population characteristics such as when young people move away from rural areas. Such changes can weaken the connections on which trust is built. Policymakers should approach building, maintaining, and rebuilding trust as a continuous process.

Building trust with communities

All of the projects worked with the communities they sought to understand. This involved not only hearing the voices of community members but collaborating with communities. The projects reached out to a wide range of people, especially those who are often left out of policy research and, as a result, whose voices are not normally heard. The lessons learned on how to build trust are relevant not only to the conduct of research, but also to how policymakers can effectively engage with their communities.

The projects themselves sought to build trust, drawing lessons about its wider local role. *Beyond School Gates* heard directly from primary school children and parents. *Social Welfare Legal Advice* interviewed local people, including those with experience of complex social welfare problems, as well as advice providers. *Transformative Justice* engaged directly with women with lived experience of the criminal justice system – women who were survivors of domestic abuse and had sought justice, and women who had convictions. *Nature-based Integration* worked with, and empowered, community researchers and involved people with migrant and non-migrant backgrounds. *Rural Assets* worked with individuals and groups in rural communities that were actively, or previously, engaged in a formal asset acquisition process.

The projects recognised the need to establish trust in order to hear these voices, which takes time. *Social Welfare Legal Advice* found value in working through one or more locally-based organisations which had already established trusting relationships with the local community. They conducted interviews in a Community Café as this was perceived to be a 'trusted and

safe space'.[37] *Transformative Justice* relied on 'borrowing the trust' that local residents already had in a community organisation, and making time for participants to form new bonds and a sense of community, especially as the project involved bringing together people with varied identities, views and experiences.[38,39] *Transformative Justice* found that an arts-based approach helped to bring different views and people together in a meaningful way, while *Nature-based Integration* showed how its attempts to make their nature-focused workshops creative helped to bring participants closer to each other.[40,41]

The Institute for Community Studies reported that the trust established by the Understanding Communities researchers enabled them to 'know their participants more intimately and build the psychological safety to share complex or difficult experiences'.[42]

People tend to have greater trust in locally based services and organisations

Locally-based services and organisations were found to be more trusted in some of the evidence. This corresponds with wider research funded by both the Nuffield Foundation and the British Academy which shows that there is a long-running trend in which people trust local government more than central government across a range of measures.[43] *Beyond School Gates* showed that families were more likely to engage with services and activities for children that were offered hyperlocally, not only because they were easier to access, but also because of the trust and confidence that families had in what was nearby and familiar.[44] Local schools were often places where people of different ethnicity, faith or linguistic background made connections.[45]

Social Welfare Legal Advice revealed that locally-based in-person advice services were preferred - by both older and younger interviewees - for the same reasons. Hyperlocal services were more accessible and allowed people to build familiarity and trust with an adviser. Particularly where community-based organisations reflected the culture and language of the communities they served, they could provide vital early help to people in difficulty.[46]

Where local organisations can rely on local authorities, positive outcomes can be delivered. For example, the support and engagement of local authorities, and other local and national support organisations, could make a significant impact to rural asset acquisition, when they valued and supported rural community groups through complex processes.[47]

Local services and activities can help to build trust between community members

The projects showed how trusted local schools, public spaces that felt safe, and the arts-based workshops some offered during the research, could help bring people together who would not usually meet or talk with each other.

Beyond School Gates revealed that parents/carers' own connections and confidence in mixing with others correlated with their children's development of diverse friendships, particularly outside school. The connections children made could help bring together parents who would not have met otherwise, but children needed their parents' support to continue friendships

37   Social Welfare Legal Advice, Final Report, p. 45.
38   Transformative Justice, Final Report, p. 36.
39   Transformative Justice, Final Report, p. 55.
40   Transformative Justice, Final Report, p. 10.
41   Nature-based Integration, Final Report, p. 30.
42   Institute for Community Studies, Understanding Communities Final Insight Report, 2025
43   Abrams, D. & Lalot, F. (2021) 'What has happened to trust and cohesion since Tier 4 restrictions and the third national lockdown (December 2020 – March 2021)? Further evidence from national surveys', report for the British Academy; see also Broadwood, J. et al (2021) Beyond Us and Them: Policy and Practice for Strengthening Social Cohesion in Local Areas
44   Beyond School Gates, Final Report, p. 27.
45   Beyond School Gates, Final Report, p. 6.
46   Social Welfare Legal Advice, Final Report, pp. 6-7, p. 59.
47   Rural Assets, Final Report, p. 42, 72.

outside school. Schools could help build trust among parents and, through activities they provided, help diverse parents meet and connect. In this way, the school acted 'as a broker of the contact'.[48]

As outlined in the previous chapter, local context can also be a pivotal means of strengthening community cohesion, resilience and trust. A shared sense of history helped 'build empathy and belonging' between *Transformative Justice* workshop participants as they began to build a community group; sharing memories of the area was a helpful focus for conversations.[49] Similarly, sharing childhood memories of nature during *Nature-based Integration's* arts-based workshops was positive for participants with migrant and non-migrant backgrounds, and it contributed to building relationships.[50]

Trust in services and organisations can quickly be eroded

Trust in services and organisations can be undermined when they feel distant, don't meet people's needs, adopt a punitive approach, make mistakes and/or feel unsafe.

Some participants in *Social Welfare Legal Advice* expressed mistrust in central government, local government and other public services (such as health and the police). People found it hard to contact services that had moved online, and austerity and punitive approaches to social welfare had eroded trust. People described errors with benefits that had taken a long time to resolve and been deeply detrimental to their financial situation and mental health. Where people had had a previously disappointing experience, they often delayed going to see an advisor.[51] Similarly, many of the women that took part in *Transformative Justice* felt failed by the organisations that comprise the justice system, and experienced a strong sense of injustice, powerlessness and 'lacking a voice'.[52]

There is evidence that the public is currently more likely to trust private companies than the government with their personal data; *Administrative Data* concluded that lack of public trust is a key barrier to the potential use of local authorities' data (such as library membership, noise complaints) to increase understanding of local needs.[53]

A sense of being distant from central (or urban) decision-making bodies could lead to a sense of 'helplessness' in rural communities.[54] Some public authority interviewees in *Rural Assets* recognised that prior bad experiences (for example when engaging with the authority's planning processes) could have eroded people's trust, and this needed to be accounted for when the authority was building relationships with community groups to help the asset transfer process.[55] This breakdown in trust could also run in the opposite direction; rural communities felt that public authorities tended not to trust their capability and were resistant to the idea of community ownership.[56]

Trust in a place or activity implies feeling safe, secure, and welcome. *Transformative Justice* chose to use the term 'brave space' instead of 'safe space' to describe their workshops, to reflect that people might not always feel comfortable (or 'safe') in meeting new people and sharing experiences, but they emphasised the importance of participants' safety.[57] *Nature-based Integration* revealed that safety and security concerns - including having experienced incidents of racism - were common barriers to being able to access parks and other natural spaces. Barriers were more likely to be reported by women and people from ethnically diverse backgrounds.[58]

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48   Beyond School Gates, Final Report, p. 21.
49   Transformative Justice, Final Report, p. 10.
50   Nature-based Integration, Final Report, p.19
51   Social Welfare Legal Advice, Final Report, p. 58 and pp. 71-72.
52   Transformative Justice, Final Report, p. 32.
53   Administrative Data, Draft Final Report, p.7, 19.
54   Rural Assets, Final Report, p. 60.
55   Rural Assets, Final Report, p. 55.
56   Rural Assets, Final Report, p. 8.
57   Transformative Justice, Final Report, pp. 64-65.
58   Nature-based Integration, Final Report, p. 22.

Connection

Key messages:

- Connection is an important theme in understanding community integration and cohesion. This can be divided into two related elements: connectivity and connectedness.

- Communities that support a diverse set of social connections across difference are more likely to be cohesive.

- Digital technology can play a key role in supporting connection within and between communities, but poor connectivity and a lack of digital skills can leave some communities at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing services.

Connection was identified as a broad but significant theme in helping to understand how communities work. Communities thrive where people within them are able to connect meaningfully and creatively with one another and the wider world. The research projects illuminated the significance of two related aspects: connectivity and connectedness. These two terms, while related, have a clear distinction that we use within this chapter. Connectedness describes the feeling of connection between people, for example, the strength of interpersonal bonds and social interactions within a community. Connectedness was found to be an important contributing factor for both community integration and cohesion, and policymakers should actively support projects which improve connectedness if they are focusing on such outcomes.

Connectivity refers to the ability for a device or system to allow people to connect with others, whether by internet, walking routes, transport, or local newsletters and community boards. Connectivity can enable connectedness for communities, while inversely, a lack of the resources and capabilities which foster connectivity can inhibit a community's connectedness. Policymakers should be aware that digital connectivity can play a supporting role for communities but is not sufficient on its own.

Social connectedness is an important factor in supporting community integration

Social connectedness was found to be a key enabler for community integration, facilitated by bridging agents and opportunities as well as the establishment and negotiation of relevant social boundaries. *Beyond School Gates* saw the importance of 'connecting across difference', finding that children can act as key agents for building connections across diverse communities as they are often 'more open-minded than adults when interacting with others'.[59]

Nature-based Integration found nature and green spaces important for facilitating social integration for some migrant communities, around activities such as community gardening projects, nature walks, and outdoor education programmes.[60] In these particularities, natural environments served to 'foster meaningful social interactions' 'critical for community cohesion and individual wellbeing', a key aspect of the Home Office Indicators of Integration.[61]

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59   Beyond School Gates, Final Report, p. 21.
60   Nature-based Integration, Final Report, p. 34.
61   Nature-based Integration, Final Report, p. 6.

Such facilitations of social connection can also play a crucial role for community access to social welfare legal advice. This project emphasised the importance of key individuals and organisations who act as 'community connectors'.[62] Its data revealed a correlation between social connectedness and wellbeing; individuals with larger and more connected social networks reported having higher levels of life satisfaction.[63] However, connectedness was not always a gateway to accessing support, as a large and highly connected social network was also found to impede likelihood to seek support among some communities with shared negative experiences of services.[64]

It is the most vulnerable within communities who need initiatives that support them to build social connections. In workshops with women with experience of the justice system, *Transformative Justice* found a demand for spaces that foster community connections aimed at people who 'may be isolated and at risk of being exploited by others'.[65] This presumes some guarantee of safety for the most vulnerable. This includes, controversially, the need for controlling the access of some groups to safe spaces in order to enable vulnerable groups to feel at ease, especially when the excluded groups cannot meet in other spaces in a community. Connectedness cannot always be symmetrical or ubiquitous; it includes challenges that are both practical and ethical, poised between equal distribution of resources and assets, and ensuring fair access.

Communities that demonstrate a diversity of social connections across difference are more likely to thrive and be resilient

The Understanding Communities programme has acknowledged that 'individuals are simultaneously members of multiple communities, with connections emerging from a range of social processes'.[66] Yet this multiplicity – and its texture - is heavily dependent on local specificities. *Social Welfare Legal Advice,* while concluding that social connections were key to effective advice services, found that the size, range and make-up of social networks varied from community to community. Sharing information via social networks was key to people seeking help and advice.

As outlined in the Place chapter, a range of local spaces and services can facilitate social connection, such as parks, libraries, sports centres and schools. But the role of these places in building connectedness is contingent on how people from different backgrounds and with different needs come to use them and interact with each other as a result.[67] The people who work or volunteer within these spaces and services can be an important resource for the individuals and communities who use them. For example, research carried out by London Development Trust on young people's views and needs in relation to social and cultural infrastructure found that trusted individuals, such as sports coaches or community leaders, act as 'pivotal people' in enabling young people to feel comfortable in spaces and places.[68]

In planning how local public spaces and services can strengthen social connectivity, effort should be made to engage with diverse community voices in their design and management. This includes children, who are often overlooked, as shown by the British Academy's Childhood Policy Programme, which found that engaging children directly in the design of policy can improve the assessment of policy impact on children in different contexts, increasing positive outcomes for a larger number of children.

Beyond School Gates found that schoolchildren were more likely to forge diverse social connections and, in doing so, could positively influence the social connections of the adults in their lives. Conversely, the research also showed that adults were key to influencing children's friendships outside of school, and schools themselves could play a helpful role in bringing parents together. For example, after-school activities such as sports clubs were an important way of connecting families together across difference.

62   Social Welfare Legal Advice, Final Report, p. 7, 16.
63   Social Welfare Legal Advice, Final Report, p. 51.
64   Social Welfare Legal Advice, Final Report, p. 51.
65   Transformative Justice, Final Report, p. 57.
66   Second Insight Report: Understanding Communities, p. 13.
67   British Academy & Bennett Institute (2025) Measuring social and cultural infrastructure
68   Harris, E. et al. (2024) Investigating Young People's Social and Cultural Infrastructure. The British Academy.

While digital technology can play an important role in supporting connectivity within and between communities, digital-only services don't meet everyone's needs

Certain communities are disadvantaged when it comes to digital connectivity. The *Rural Assets* project identified poor digital connectivity as a specific challenge for many rural communities.[69] Poor quality internet as well as limited digital capabilities were seen as barriers to connecting up rural communities, hence a strong desire in these communities to maintain face-to-face engagement.[70] The creation of a 'digital hub' in unused but accessible rural buildings for remote working as part of the 'Grow the Glens' initiative was cited as one example for overcoming the barriers to digital connectivity in rural areas which, in turn, can support rural economic growth while also providing a space for connecting members of the local community.[71]

When it comes to digitalisation, it is worth acknowledging the full spectrum of reasons why people might be digitally disengaged. In addition to the familiar issues of digital exclusion, disengagement can also be motivational and relate to considered preference, distrust of systems, or concerns about privacy and security. It can also be partial or selective, such that individuals may readily engage with some aspects of digital technologies but resist others.

In facilitating connectedness, digital tools can strengthen other types of ties. *Nature-based Integration* found that digital technology enabled community members to share knowledge about nature. For example, participants used online searches and web tools to learn more about horticulture and foraging, thus augmenting their connection to nature and to each other.[72]

In terms of public service access, digital options tend to enhance connectivity when complementing, and not substituting, offline and in-person facilities. *Social Welfare Legal Advice* showed that there is limited demand for additional online services in some communities, suggesting that moves to digitise advice services should be 'incremental', leaving open alternative options for accessing advice such as telephone helplines and in-person options.

Where services are being digitised, they should rely on 'tried and tested technology' and 'take account of existing levels of digital competence and lack of access with some parts of local communities'.[73] In the case of advice services, lack of digital literacy and limited access to digital services can exacerbate existing inequalities, suggesting that digital modes of delivery should be used to augment rather than replace in-person and telephone services (again, based on community consultation).

69   Rural Assets, Final Report, p. 25
70   Rural Assets, Final Report, p. 31
71   Rural Assets, Final Report, pp. 75-76
72   Nature-based Integration, Final Report, p. 21.
73   Social Welfare Legal Advice, Final Report, p. 13.

Community capacity

Key messages:

- Lack of physical, social and cultural infrastructure and public sector provision significantly hampers community capacity.

- Community capacity is strongly linked to the resources of key individuals who volunteer their resources to improve their communities. This responsibility can become a heavy burden for those people.

- A focus on supporting and building capacity within communities can create a virtuous circle at a local level, relieving some demand on public services.

- Lack of sustainable and secure funding for community-based and community-led initiatives is a significant problem when it comes to equipping communities with the resources to thrive.

The projects show how communities can, and do, contribute to society in distinct ways from the state, but that these contributions are often facilitated by state support in building and maintaining the right level of local capacity and expertise. Examples from the research included communities fostering understanding and building the bonds between residents that are essential for social cohesion; intervening early to help people get back on track; providing local expertise; and directly boosting neighbourhood conditions and opportunities. Yet these contributions were constrained when communities were having to use their limited time and resources to 'firefight' deep inadequacies in core services, and when the state lacked sufficient capacity to effectively support community action. While individuals who commit to 'get involved' can yield both community gains and personal satisfaction, they also often carry a heavy burden, and policymakers should think about how they can better support and enable them.

Alongside equipping communities with effective public services, clear laws and policy guidance, the research shows the significant potential value of building social and cultural infrastructure through channels such as practical support and longer-term accessible funding for communities. This is particularly important for those communities with the greatest needs, fewest resources and most limited outward connections. Policymakers should recognise the interdependence between community and state capacity and be aware of how increases in community capacity can decrease demand for some public service provision, and vice versa.

A lack of infrastructure and public sector capacity hampers communities

The core structures and services that communities need to function effectively have been steadily eroded by public sector austerity and the cost-of-living crisis. The research projects have revealed the significant challenges that this has placed on communities, and why it is essential to restore and enhance investment in local public services as a matter of social justice, as much as a key driver of local and regional growth and prosperity.

A lack of public transport infrastructure would have hampered participation by community members in the *Transformative Justice* research if the project had not offered to pay for taxis. *Nature-based Integration* emphasised the transport challenges in accessing nature (and therefore the personal and community benefits associated with nature), especially for those without cars or living with disabilities. In terms of digital infrastructure, local authorities currently sit on rich sources of administrative data and could use it to analyse and address some local needs more efficiently. But as *Administrative Data* showed, they do not currently have the data infrastructure and other capacity required to do this.[74]

The capacity of communities depends on the resources of individuals within them

Resources - including money, time, knowledge, skills, equipment, health – are unevenly distributed within communities as well as between them. It is clear from the research that the overall size of a community, as well as the demographic makeup within it, affects the level of resources available.

For example, rural communities' smaller and older populations reduced the potential pool of volunteers.[75] This made 'succession planning' harder and, in the case of asset acquisition, presented challenges in proving to authorities that the project would be sustainable over the longer term. Exacerbated by the out-migration of young people, finding the people with skills needed to manage complex legal, planning and project processes could be challenging. *Rural Assets'* Northern Ireland case study illustrated the range of skills important in such processes, with community board members having backgrounds that included architecture, construction, accountancy and grant writing.[76]

Effective leadership within community organisations was essential for successful asset transfer.[77] The collective of community members formed during the *Transformative Justice* project recognised the importance of building the capacity of a whole group of volunteers rather than leaving everything to a few key individuals. But ultimately, without some people being willing to lead, activities were not sustainable.[78]

As well as the individual and social benefits of community action, there can be high personal costs for those who get involved

The resourcing issues raised in the previous section and the lack of support from government make it harder for people to get involved in their communities without placing considerable pressure on themselves.

Volunteers can have multiple demands on their time, juggling family, work, and sometimes complex personal issues.[79] *Rural Assets* noted reports of 'burnout and fatigue' due to the small number of available volunteers in rural areas, with some participants saying that volunteering could be 'stressful' and 'lonely', and some stretching their time across several projects. Where communities had taken on the responsibility of delivering services that local people relied on, the stress associated with maintaining and sustaining assets could be high.[80]

Staff and volunteers across all the *Social Welfare Legal Advice* case study areas were often going through the same problems as their clients, and some organisations therefore provided their staff with free food and the offer of using offices as 'warm hubs'. Staff and volunteers could feel 'moral injury' when they found themselves unable to improve people's circumstances due to insufficient state provision.[81]

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74   Administrative Data, Final Report, p. 19.
75   Rural Assets, Final Report, p 8. Social Welfare Legal Advice, Final Report, p. 65.
76   Rural Assets, Final Report, p. 73.
77   Rural Assets, Final Report, p. 17.
78   Transformative Justice, Final Report, p 11.
79   Transformative Justice, Final Report, p. 56.
80   Rural Assets, Final Report, p. 10, p. 30, p. 97.
81   Social Welfare Legal Advice, Final Report, p.70.

With the right support, communities can boost individual and local capacity, relieve some pressure from public services, and help achieve statutory goals

The personal costs outlined above could be reduced to more sustainable levels where the right support and resources are made available, and particularly where this encourages sharing the burden across a larger number of volunteers and staff in different organisations and agencies.

Schools are often called upon to contribute to society in many ways beyond delivering the educational curriculum, precisely because they are an integral part of communities and contain a high degree of expertise in establishing trust and building relationships. In emphasising the potential of schools to support wider, diverse connections between children and their families, *Beyond School Gates* also recognised that such community-building work requires time and money, and that the capacity of schools to do this therefore relies on support from government at different levels, including through helping bring local people together by supporting connections between very local groups.[82]

Where effective support is provided, it can create a virtuous circle, giving communities the tools they need to respond to the challenges they face while, in turn, relieving pressures on public services and boosting growth and prosperity.

Rural Assets concluded that successful asset acquisition processes could increase individual and community capacity by building expertise, skills and confidence. Completing one successful acquisition could give the community confidence to undertake more, as with the Lancashire case study, where the community charity took on a community centre and library, followed by a shop and then a pub.[83]

Nature-based Integration's UK-wide survey of nature-engaged integration initiatives also revealed many examples of individual empowerment, such as participants being paid for organising local events, having the opportunity to make decisions, being part of co-development processes, and forming new social connections. Respondents to the survey often presented new social connections and the number of volunteers trained as evidence of the initiatives' success.[84]

Community capacity needs sustainable long-term financial support

The precarity and uncertainty of the funding and support mechanisms in place for community-led projects and activities threaten to unravel much of the good work taking place. Government has often offered funding through short-term initiatives, which can be withdrawn prematurely.[85] In such an environment, there is not enough confidence for communities to look long-term and generate the types of activity that truly transform lives and have lasting economic and social effects.

The research shows that if advice services are to support their local communities as effectively as possible and help prevent people's problems from escalating, they need sustainable funding guaranteed over multiple years. If local arts organisations are to bring people together and explore different perspectives, thereby building the bonds which sustain supportive communities, they need to be properly resourced and know that this funding will be protected for the foreseeable future to avoid risk and uncertainty disincentivising longer-term projects and interventions. Schools need to be supported – not only financially but also with time and flexible policies and regulations – to hold the events which can bring diverse parents together. Inclusive community participation and co-design to develop community spaces requires resources, including compensation for those who take part.

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82   Beyond School Gates, Final Report, p 7, 29.
83   Rural Assets, Final Report, p. 9, 27.
84   Nature-based Integration, Final Report, p. 15.
85   For example, the Community Ownership Fund which was withdrawn by the Government in December 2024. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-ownership-fund-prospectus

For example, *Social Welfare Legal Advice* showed how the short-term funding available to the sector meant that jobs were generally low paid and insecure, causing problems with staff recruitment and retention. Impacts of this included under-staffed services, high costs of inducting new staff, and people using services having to explain their situations again to each different staff member they saw. Funding processes were often competitive and complicated, which was particularly difficult for smaller organisations to navigate and made partnership working between providers more difficult.[86]

But sometimes the financial support community activities need is relatively small; the activities in *Nature-based Integration's* case studies supported inclusion by providing help with transport expenses and childcare. In-kind support from local councils was also of real help to many of the surveyed nature-engaged integration initiatives; this included allowing buildings to be used for storage and providing equipment for gardening and environmental work.[87] The issue is ensuring that funding remains in place long-term.

86   Social Welfare Legal Advice, Final Report, pp. 56-57.
87   Nature-based Integration, Final Report, p 15, 22.

Conclusion

The Understanding Communities programme was developed in response to a growing recognition that communities rooted in place play a vital role in shaping individual and collective wellbeing, particularly in times of social, economic, and political uncertainty that we currently face. The projects supported by the programme speak to a varied set of policy areas, demographics, and geographies, illuminating the fact that simple, short-term or cookie-cutter approaches are insufficient to create and strengthen the conditions that communities require to thrive. To support communities effectively, policymakers must seek in-depth understanding of the community's local context in terms of the place's demography, geography and history.

But understanding alone is insufficient. Communities should not be treated as just passive recipients of policy, but active participants who have voice and agency. The projects we have supported show that lived experiences, local knowledge, and networks are essential. If policymakers are to integrate these elements effectively into their plans, they must actively create the opportunities and structures needed for sustained, in-depth engagement with communities, thereby building the trust required for effective participation.

Nor should the interdependence between the state and communities be ignored. Many of the projects have shown how communities can foster cohesion, resilience, and wellbeing, while others highlighted where gaps and deficiencies in public provision have been plugged by community efforts. However, community capacity is limited, and in many places is being stretched increasingly thin. Policymakers should look to boost the capacity of communities where possible through supportive funding, infrastructure and processes, which will both improve outcomes within communities and relieve some pressures on public services.

Below, we present specific policy messages for both local and national policymakers working collaboratively using longer term strategic vision that fully involves the third sector to create ways to improve the conditions for communities, particularly in terms of the key themes identified across our projects: place, trust, connection and community capacity. These messages demonstrate the importance of meeting the needs of communities at hyperlocal as well as city or regional authority levels. We acknowledge that policymakers are dealing with widespread funding constraints. With that in mind, some of these recommendations are about adapting existing processes and approaches to investment, rather than always increasing funding. These messages are derived from the six research projects we have funded and are not formal positions of the British Academy or the Nuffield Foundation. They reflect the variety of ways in which communities can be given voice, supported and enabled.

Local Authorities should:

1. Prioritise long-term investment into community spaces and key personnel of community projects

    a. Improve provision of free-to-access communal spaces to enable fostering of diverse social connections. The approach for this will naturally differ depending on whether the duties are statutory (e.g. libraries) or discretionary (e.g. community centres). To deliver improved provision, local policymakers should work with communities on design of community spaces, including factors such as how open, accessible and inclusive they are, and how to reach them. When considering spaces for particularly vulnerable groups, it is vital to examine how inclusivity and safety can be effectively balanced.

    b. Invest in play and activity facilities in free-to-access public spaces to allow children and young people to play. These facilities should cater for a range of ages and be coupled with measures that improve safety and discourage antisocial behaviour.

    c. Ensure that sufficient resources are allocated within funded community projects to support lead volunteers and staff. Leadership is key for community projects to succeed,

so it is important to ensure community leaders are supported. Providing resource such as skills support and administration can help community leaders feel able to stay involved and be effective.

2. Co-design services and spaces with communities

    a. Work closely with community groups to collect data and insights on how residents wish to use community spaces. This could be facilitated using a measurement framework such as the DCMS Culture and Heritage Capital Approach or the Social and Cultural Infrastructure measurement framework developed by the British Academy and the Bennett Institute.

    b. Co-design community spaces with the people who they are designed for. Communities should be active participants in developing communal spaces and be able to provide their voice for all aspects of the design. This includes facilities for migrants, the vulnerable, children and young people, who should also be consulted directly.

    c. Ensure sufficient consultation with community users when initiating processes to digitise public services or applying novel data analysis methods. Digital-only services don't meet everyone's needs, as digital access and literacy is uneven across communities. People can move in and out of digital poverty, and this can mean digital services can shift from help to hindrance for the same people if their circumstances change. Meanwhile, community groups should always play a role in controlling who has access to their data and for what purpose.

3. Deliver services through local organisations where appropriate

    a. Examine how consultation and procurement processes can better engage with local and hyperlocal organisations and use them for service delivery. Delivering services and engagement through hyperlocal groups improves the prospect of community buy-in due to higher levels of trust. It is a positive sign that the English Devolution White Paper acknowledges that for hyperlocal issues, communities should be empowered to make change happen, and emphasises 'working with civic society organisations to drive community improvements'.

Central Government should:

1. Improve approaches to funding communities to better support the development and maintenance of conditions needed for them to thrive

    a. Within current and future funds for communities, focus on provision of longer-term, sustainable funding for grass-roots organisations. This will ensure that organisations can have a significant local impact and relieve pressure on public services. Sustainable funding is not only needed to ensure organisational continuity but also, as the Community Capacity chapter showed, to safeguard wellbeing. The government's intention to move to multi-year settlements for local government from 2026-27 is positive, but our research suggests this should be extended to include multi-year funding for the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector, as suggested by the Civil Society Group.[88] It is important to note, however, that communities cannot be expected to replace core public services and infrastructure and, indeed, effective community action relies on it.

    b. Consider closely the context-specific factors that foster social and cultural value before deciding which assets and services to prioritise investment in. The research findings complement existing work in DCMS and MHCLG to build on the guidance in the HM Treasury Green Book to better account for, and ultimately work to enhance, social and cultural value in communities. There is a risk of government investing capital in new assets which either do not meet a community's needs or are inaccessible to certain groups if local context and identity is not properly embedded in the decision-making process.

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88 Charity leaders set out the sector's 'asks' ahead of Spending Review' (January 2025): cfg.org.uk/news/charity_leaders_set_out_the_sector_asks_ahead_of_spending_review

c. In future, funds open to local authorities should emphasise the need for provision of support to communities with asset acquisition. Volunteers need to give significant time and skills in order to acquire community assets, and the Government should enable public authorities to support this. This could include introducing standardised social value measurement tools which can enable community benefit to be quantified, and discounts offered on the market value of assets.

d. Provide resources and support for schools to organise initiatives that bring parents together. Schools are uniquely placed to bring diverse families together and should be supported to organise events and take part in initiatives that allow them to do this. While the DfE is best placed to provide additional resource, existing DCMS and MHCLG funding for community events and initiatives should also emphasise the usage of schools.

e. Ensure that the plans set out in the Digital Inclusion Action Plan to build digital skills includes additional support for digitally excluded communities, such as through the Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund. It is crucial that policymakers focus on improving access to digital services in communities and offer initiatives to actively build digital skills where appropriate, prioritising communities with high rates of digital inequality.

f. Assist with development of local authority capacity and infrastructure to enable the use of administrative data to measure and improve community wellbeing. Local authorities hold rich administrative data that can inform their decision-making, but they need support to make effective use of it—both in building internal capacity and improving the national data infrastructure.

2. Provide guidance to local bodies which prioritises strengthening communities

a. Explore how statutory guidance can help to ensure that socio-economic, cultural and ethnic diversity within schools reflects the diversity of local communities. Given that schools are a key space for fostering diverse social connections within communities, more can be done in terms of policy through school inclusion criteria, catchment areas and intake to ensure that schools better represent the communities they are located within.

b. Give guidance to Local Authorities on how to support local groups to connect and form partnerships and support the third sector organisations which facilitate this. This guidance will ensure that Local Authorities follow best practice and can share knowledge about the value of different projects, and how to make them effective. Such guidance should recognise and explicitly identify the likely benefits and savings that are likely to accrue from resourcing such groups on a rolling basis.

3. Proceed with plans to make it easier for communities to acquire local assets

a. As outlined in the English Devolution White Paper, communities should have first refusal on acquiring local assets. The Government should also consult on changes to further improve legislative mechanisms and processes for community asset acquisition. In particular, England, Wales and Northern Ireland can empower community groups trying to acquire community assets by learning from Scotland's approach, which includes legislative mechanisms present in Part 5 of the Community Empowerment Act 2015 (Asset Transfer) and the presence of a formal guidance.

The Understanding Communities programme has shone light on how policymakers can centre communities in the design, implementation and delivery of policies which affect them. First, it is vital for there to be deep understanding of the place and context in which the communities are situated in, and the social networks that are present. Second, policymakers should support both direct measures and the broader environment in ways which can strengthen both connectedness and connectivity within and across communities, and which are also driven and maintained by the communities themselves. Third, it is essential that policymakers avoid formulaic approaches, and work with both individuals and the third sector organisations within communities in joined up ways that can build trust. And finally, while the research we have supported has shown the potential of communities in driving local renewal, it has also highlighted that such efforts are insufficient on their own, especially in the context of a retreating public sector and weakening supporting infrastructure.

Appendix A: Programme strategy

The Understanding Communities approach

Understanding Communities was a collaboration between the British Academy and the Nuffield Foundation, guided by an expert steering group, drawn from research, policy and practice, and co-chaired by Professor Dominic Abrams and Professor Ash Amin. Following an open call for workshop applicants, fifty-four people took part in a series of online workshop sessions. Participants comprised early- to mid-career researchers, national and local policymakers, and people working in community organisations, from across all four UK nations, and all nine regions of England, and from diverse research areas, including: public policy, social policy, education, environment, psychology, sociology, urban planning, law, neuroscience, criminology, public health, children's rights, creative arts, migration studies, digital science, microeconomics, macroeconomics, and data science. Participants formed interdisciplinary teams and developed research proposals with input from a College of Mentors, which also comprised experts from research, policy and practice.

The research projects thought carefully about the language they used, considered how certain terms in some contexts may be controversial or stigmatising, and explained their choices. Examples include using the term 'survivor' rather than 'victim', and using 'integration' in the context of nature-based integration 'as a form of engagement between people, cultures and learning that fosters a collective sense of connection, coexistence, and belonging', in this case within natural environments such as parks and woodlands.[89,90] This report aims to respect and reflect those choices.

It should also be noted that connection was important for the methodologies and approaches of the programme itself. The projects 'created new opportunities for connection' and the researchers were 'instrumental in developing new infrastructure to facilitate connection beyond or within communities' – the final insight report by the Institute for Community Studies provides more detail.[91]

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89   Transformative Justice Final Report, pages 16-17.
90   Nature-based Integration Final Report, page 25 (emphasis added).
91   Institute for Community Studies Final Insight Report

Appendix B: Project summaries

1. Nature-based integration: connecting communities with/in nature (Nature-based Integration)

Research team

Dr Azadeh Fatehrad, Kingston University; Dr Davide Natalini, Anglia Ruskin University; Dr Hyab Yohannes, University of Glasgow; Gianluca Palombo, Anglia Ruskin University

Motivation

This project investigated how nature – such as parks, rivers, woodlands - can help social integration between different communities, including people with and without migrant backgrounds, refugees, and asylum seekers. The researchers argue that nature's role in building inclusive communities has traditionally been overlooked in integration policies; this research sought to fill that evidence gap. They note that theirs is the first project to extend nature-based integration to include longstanding community members.

Method

The project team used multi-method participatory approaches, including arts-based, continuous reflection, and Geographic Information System (GIS)-based approaches. They worked in three varied case study areas: the London Borough of Haringey, which has a young and ethnically diverse population, and many green spaces; Blackburn with Darwen in Northwest England, which comprises towns and villages with parks, forests and hills, has an ethnically diverse population and is one of five Integration Area local authorities in England; and Isle of Lewis, an island in the Outer Hebrides with moorlands and beaches, whose population is mainly White Scottish and which has participated in refugee resettlement schemes.

National surveys with 66 respondents enabled the creation of an open-access database of nature-engaged initiatives across the UK. The initiatives were mainly led by grassroots organisations with extensive volunteer and other stakeholder involvement, including local authority support. Despite facing funding challenges, and a need for more leaders with migrant backgrounds, the initiatives promoted social interaction, empowerment of participants, and care of the natural environment. Together with a literature review, this database helped inform the project's conceptual framework, and the policy and practice resources it developed. Two community researchers in each case study area supported local engagement. Participatory mapping with residents (119 people in Haringey, 105 in Blackburn, and 76 in Lewis) collected in-depth insights into people's connections with nature. Four arts-based workshops in each area, involving 42 people in all, captured sensory and emotional responses of participants to nature via activities such as collage-making, photography and creating terrariums. Researchers also directly observed the engagement of communities with nature. A detailed analysis of 48 artworks created by artists of migrant backgrounds, and interviews with nine artists, highlighted the potential of nature for healing, challenging norms, and encouraging integration.

The researchers used a combination of qualitative thematic analysis, quantitative analysis, and GIS mapping software. Throughout the project, the researchers, their policy and practice team, and their advisory group, continuously reflected on and adapted the research process.

Findings

The researchers found that, as well as enhancing individuals' physical and mental health, nature acted as a common ground for diverse communities. It encouraged meaningful social interactions - strengthening existing bonds and supporting the development of new ones – between families and single people, and between people from different ethnic backgrounds, and with different accessibility needs. Connecting with nature further helped people with migrant backgrounds maintain their cultural identities and feel a sense of belonging. Some aspects of nature, such as harsh weather conditions or winter darkness, could deter people from exploring their new surroundings and engaging locally, contributing to feelings of isolation. But overall, the team found that nature had a positive effect.

Facilitators included the physical attractiveness of the natural setting, and the availability of community spaces that encouraged people to come together. The project's creative workshops were themselves an example of effective nature-based integration as they directly encouraged connections between community members. However, barriers to accessing natural spaces included the availability and cost of transport, and fear of harassment based on gender or ethnicity. Barriers were more likely to be reported by women and people from ethnically diverse backgrounds.

Conclusions

The researchers conclude that incorporating nature-based strategies into integration polices – including the Home Office's Indicators of Integration Framework - would be an important additional tool to enhance social cohesion. Based on their results, the project team developed a novel Nature-Based Integration Framework, mapping the key elements involved in the integration journeys of people that resettle in new places. They recommend that national and local programmes should be designed to promote community connections within natural settings, and note the potential of arts-based methods to inform policymaking. Further, the whole community should be involved in the development, design and management of accessible, inclusive and safe natural spaces. This may include improved public transport and pathways, quiet areas alongside active spaces, improved security such as lighting, and play areas for children.

Key reports

Nature-based Integration: Connecting Communities with/in Nature (2022-24)

The role of nature in migrant integration in the UK

2.   Rural assets: policy and practice insights from the devolved nations (Rural Assets)

Research team

Dr Danielle Hutcheon, Glasgow Caledonian University; Dr Sarah Nason, Bangor University; Dr Bobby Macaulay, University of the Highlands and Islands Perth College; Dr Margaret Currie James, Hutton Institute; Dr Davide Natalini, Anglia Ruskin University; John Hallett, CommunityThinking.org; Kieran Sinclair, Glasgow Caledonian University; Richard Osterhus, Derry & Strabane District Council

Motivation

This project investigated how engaging in processes of community asset acquisition – by which community organisations gain ownership (or lease) of publicly owned land or buildings – impacts on the empowerment, resilience and wellbeing of rural communities. The researchers note that asset acquisition is promoted at a UK policy level as a way to strengthen communities, both socially and economically. At the same time, the disposal of public assets is encouraged to save public money. While much research focuses on the outcomes of asset acquisition for communities, the project team identified a lack of evidence about how the acquisition process itself might impact on rural communities. This project sought to address that gap.

Method

The researchers compared the policy and legal frameworks on asset acquisition in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland, conducted a scoping review of literature, and undertook in-depth qualitative research.

Case studies in each nation involved: a community charity in an isolated village in Lancashire, England, formed to combat cuts to rural community services and which now owns a community centre, library, shop and pub; a community forest charity in the sparsely populated Highlands, Scotland, which owns a log cabin and forest, and was trying to buy an abandoned village to preserve the history of the Highland Clearances; a community organisation in a market town in Powys, Wales, which was trying to acquire a closed-down day centre, to host care and support services and create a social hub; and a community interest company in a rural small town in County Antrim, Northern Ireland, which aimed to support local economic development, and had converted a former police barracks into a hybrid working space. In each, the team conducted in-depth interviews with community members, public authority representatives and key stakeholders; 13 in England, 13 in Scotland, 10 in Wales and 10 in Northern Ireland. They also co-produced activities with participants, such as collecting community feedback via a storytelling event, and running a community consultation workshop.

Findings

The researchers found that the main driver for communities to acquire assets from public authorities was not an active desire to run services, but rather the loss or threatened closure of publicly funded services and facilities. Other motivations included to help local economic development, to reduce the outmigration of young people, and to care for assets with local historical and cultural significance. For public authorities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the main driver of asset disposal was cost saving, including disposing of assets seen as liabilities, whereas in Scotland it was community empowerment.

The main barrier to asset acquisition across the four nations was a lack of local capacity and/or specific skills to take part in such a long, complex process, with small volunteer pools. Other challenges included engaging with dispersed communities, representing wider community views, public authority bureaucracy, high asset price and, except in Scotland, ineffective legislation and no strategic capital funding. Key enablers included skilled community organisations, supportive public authorities, local and national support organisations and, in Scotland, the Community Empowerment Act 2015 (Part 5).

Positive impacts of the process, reported by communities, included coalescing around a common purpose, forming new connections, tackling loneliness, having a platform for change, and developing new skills. With successful acquisition, community empowerment and/or resilience could build further through creating (or maintaining) services and facilities, retaining or attracting residents, and feeling hope for the future. However, the process could be disempowering if communities felt they had no choice, and / or if the acquisition wasn't successful. Communities without the capacity or skills to pursue an asset could be excluded altogether. Volunteers could become over-burdened, and issues with the ongoing maintenance of assets could reduce resilience.

Conclusions

The researchers conclude that asset acquisition can have various benefits for rural communities, who can often deliver local services and facilities effectively, but it can also bring problems. Policy that reflects the rural context, support for communities to participate, and training for public authority staff, are vital. They recommend that clearer processes, legislation, and strategic capital funding should be introduced in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, as already exists in Scotland. Further, standardised measurement tools for social value could better account for community benefit, enabling discounts on the market price of assets.

Key report

Rural Assets: Policy and Practice Insights from the Devolved Nations

3.   Beyond school gates: children's contribution to community integration (Beyond School Gates)

Research team

Ronke Adeyanju, University of Kent; Lindsey Cameron, University of Kent; Jocelyn Dautel, Queens University Belfast; Magdalena Dujczynski, Middlesex University; Charlotte Haberstroh, Kings College London; Meg Henry, The Linking Network; Lorien Jasny, University of Exeter; Helen King, University of Newcastle; Emily Murphy, University of Newcastle; Mona Sakr, Middlesex University

Motivation

This project explored the role of children in building connections within communities between people of different ethnicity, faith or linguistic background, and considered how local policymakers, schools and other stakeholders could best support this. The researchers identified a lack of existing research on the potential contribution of schools and children to positive community relationships, and sought to address that gap.

Method

The project focused on three towns with ethnically diverse populations in the Northwest of England - Bolton, Blackburn with Darwen, and Preston. The researchers consulted over 750 archival items (1950s-2020s) in national and local collections. These materials included children's letters and schoolwork, which document how young people across generations understood and acted on key issues relating to community belonging. In collaboration with the British Library and The Linking Network, a national charity which builds connections between schools, they developed a reading and creativity programme exploring themes of journeys and communities. They delivered this to five schools across the towns and interviewed 28 of the children who participated. A year later, three of the five schools agreed to participate in a follow-on project, where children co-created an animation that illustrated key themes from the original primary data, and an additional 31 children were interviewed to determine how their views of their communities had changed over time.

Four hundred and forty-four children aged nine to eleven, from seven primary schools with different levels of ethnic diversity, completed two surveys including one with psychological measures. Survey questions explored the children's views and experiences of diversity, integration, and friendship networks, both in and outside school. The team conducted in-depth interviews with 85 of these children, and 181 parents completed an online questionnaire about their own experiences. A further 50 interviews with 57 people - based in the community and voluntary sector, local authority, local schools and faith organisations - investigated the local policy context and stakeholders' views on the potential contribution of children to wider community connections.

The researchers analysed the quantitative survey data, interviews and creative work from the reading and creativity programme, mapped friendship networks, and held a workshop with 20 stakeholders to reflect on initial findings about the local policy context. The team also analysed themes from across the project, which were further developed during three community workshops with representation from local authorities, charities and schools across the three towns.

Findings

The researchers found that children in more ethnically diverse schools generally had more ethnically diverse school-based friendship groups, though this did not apply in every school. Parents/carers' own diverse connections and confidence in mixing with others correlated with their children's development of diverse friendships, particularly outside school. Schools were an important starting point for children's connections, but children needed support and approval from their parents/carers to form lasting, diverse friendships outside school. Although children could encourage parents to mix to a certain extent, schools provided important opportunities for parents to meet, connect and build trust, with brief interactions in the playground being strengthened through attending school events and activities.

Local public spaces such as nearby parks, if they felt safe, were also important in supporting diverse connections between children and families outside school. And sports clubs – notably football clubs – were particularly good for bringing parents together. Families were more likely to use very local services and activities for children, not only because they were easier to access, but because their familiarity and nearness generated trust.

Conclusions

The researchers conclude that schools play a valuable role in building trust and diverse connections between parents, and they recommend that schools should receive investment to act as community hubs. Where needed, schools should be supported to be more diverse or linked with other schools. Further, investment in safe, local parks would help sustain connections between children and families outside school. Other local services could draw on the achievements of sports clubs in making diverse families feel welcome and encouraging interaction. And partnerships between trusted local groups could help build wider community relationships, bringing people together who wouldn't usually meet.

The team have developed a 'Framework for Action' for use by local policymakers and other stakeholders to support the contribution of primary-age children to community relationships, and they recommend additional research in other areas of the country.

Key reports

Beyond School Gates: Children's Contribution to Community Integration

Beyond School Gates: How local policy can enable children's contribution to community integration

4. The role of communities and connections in social welfare legal advice (Social Welfare Legal Advice)

Research team

Dr Sarah Nason, Bangor University; Dr Peter Butcher, Bangor University; Lindsey Poole, Advice Services Alliance; Faith Osifo, Advice Services Alliance; Dr Lorien Jasny, University of Exeter; Susanne Hughes, University of Exeter; Dr Susanne Martikke, Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation (GMCVO); Dr Sara Closs-Davies, University of Manchester; Ned Sharpe, Ministry of Justice

Motivation

This project explored how people living in different areas access social welfare legal advice - which includes benefits, debt, employment, housing, immigration and social care. It looked at how advice-seeking relates to community connections, to individuals' life satisfaction, and to area characteristics. The researchers sought to fill an evidence gap in how people seek help for their social welfare problems, and what best supports their quick resolution, in a context of rising advice needs, public service cuts, and moves to digital service delivery.

Method

The project engaged with advice providers, voluntary groups and residents in four case-study areas: a dense urban neighbourhood in Rochdale Metropolitan Borough, Greater Manchester, with an ethnically diverse, relatively young population, and high levels of deprivation; a rural village on the Isle of Anglesey, Wales, with an ageing population, and a high though declining number of Welsh speakers; a coastal town in the rural South Hams district, Devon, with an older population and little ethnic diversity, where deprivation exists alongside affluence; and three wards in the inner London Borough of Hackney with ethnically diverse populations and high levels of deprivation.

The research team investigated the networks, experiences, and community connections of advice providers in each case-study, holding workshops and discussions with local advice and community organisations and key individuals such as councillors. Semi-structured in-person interviews with residents (52 in Rochdale, 39 in Anglesey, 49 in South Hams and 51 in Hackney) explored people's social networks, their experience of social welfare and/or community problems, and how they had sought advice. The team's literature review informed the questions, which they piloted and refined extensively in consultation with communities and their advisory group.

Social network analysis of the interview data considered the patterns of relationships between individuals, and between individuals and organisations/services. The team conducted quantitative analysis of multiple choice and scalar questions, and thematic analysis of qualitative interview data.

Findings

The researchers found that the characteristics of each area shaped the likelihood of people experiencing problems, the type of problems experienced, the nature of people's social networks, and how people sought advice. In general, people with both larger and more connected social networks reported higher levels of life satisfaction and feeling that life is worthwhile. Communities were providing extensive support including food, social support and connections to advice services. Particularly where they reflected the culture and language of the communities they served, community-based organisations could provide vital early help to people experiencing problems.

However, when it came to resolving social welfare legal problems, social networks only had a small effect. When problems were complex and needed specialist advice, they arose because of public sector administrative deficiencies, and/or resulted from cuts in service provision, it was hard for communities to have an impact. The loss of physical community spaces - where people can build networks - made it even harder. And, across all the areas, many people had not shared their problems with anyone, pointing to the need to raise awareness of advice and legal services.

People preferred local, in-person services to online provision. Where digital services were the only option, this created a distance and did not meet people's needs. Short-term funding made it harder to provide advice services.

Conclusions

The researchers conclude that, given public sector cuts and structural inequalities, there are limits to the extent to which communities and the advice sector can help people access justice. However, community characteristics are key to understanding how people seek advice and how problems can best be resolved, and community organisations can play an important role in connecting people with advice. The team's recommendations include that government could better support communities by funding advice services in a sustainable way, service providers should work in partnership with communities, and the advice sector should aim for their staff and volunteers to reflect the characteristics of the communities they serve. Further, digital access to services should not be the only route; public service and advice providers should also offer telephone helplines with local knowledge, together with the option to access services locally, in-person.

Key report

The role of communities and connections in social welfare legal advice

5. Transformative justice, women with convictions and uniting communities (Transformative Justice)

Research team

Professor Tirion Havard, London South Bank University; Dr Sarah Bartley, The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama; Dr Ian Mahoney, Nottingham Trent University; Dr Chris Magill, University of Brighton; Professor Chris Flood, London South Bank University

Motivation

This project took place in a context of significant backlogs in the courts and the highest ever prison population. It sought to explore whether an arts-based approach to Transformative Justice could enhance connections within communities more widely, if it could help women with convictions reconnect with their local communities, and what the individual and community benefits would be. Transformative Justice is a way of understanding crime and justice that considers the roles played by communities, wider social structures, and the criminal justice system itself. It aims to break cycles of trauma and harm. The project built on previous research showing the effectiveness of community-based approaches in tackling causes of female offending, and the success of arts-based approaches in bringing people together, with the aim of combining both within a Transformative Justice model.

Method

The research centred on Stoke-on-Trent, a city in Staffordshire, West Midlands, with significant levels of deprivation. Following systematic literature reviews, researchers held one focus group with 11 women survivors of domestic abuse who had sought justice, and another prison-based focus group with 12 women who had received custodial sentences. They conducted six interviews globally with Transformative Justice experts. Thematic analysis of the focus groups and interviews informed a series of 15 creative workshops. These were co-facilitated by two artists with lived experience of the criminal justice system, and delivered in partnership with a locally trusted arts organisation (Restoke) and a Women's Aid organisation, in a popular community building. The first seven workshops, involving local people interested in concepts of justice, resulted in them forming the 'Hopeful Justice Collective' and developing an artistic sound installation to share their ideas with the wider community. Twelve people stayed involved in the collective throughout, with others leaving or joining.

The researchers engaged with 13 women with convictions through a range of outreach work, with the intention of them joining the second phase of eight workshops. However, recruitment and retention proved challenging, and this phase was not delivered as planned, limiting answers to the original research questions. The workshop programme finished with an arts-based community event for city residents, led by the collective, to share their work and to prompt discussions about justice and fairness. The researchers held focus groups with workshop participants midway through the workshop series, and at the end. Online surveys when people first joined the workshops and at project end received 21 and 13 full responses respectively.

Findings

The researchers found that the criminal justice system had missed opportunities to support both women who were survivors of domestic abuse and those who had criminal convictions. Women felt that the system did not hear their voices and dismissed their experiences, and gave specific examples, including an injunction against a former partner not being enforced. The challenges in involving women with convictions in the community workshops showed the time and support required to overcome barriers.

There was interest among residents to come together in a local space to discuss justice. Over time, the arts approaches used in the community workshops encouraged participants to form relationships, confide difficult experiences, and express and explore differing viewpoints on justice. These discussions revealed shared experiences of hardship including abuse, homelessness and loss, alongside a sense of identity and pride within the city. Sharing

memories of the area helped participants feel comfortable and build bonds. Working towards the art installation and the community event contributed to a shared purpose. Although attitudes to justice varied widely, there was broad agreement on the need for support for people to rebuild their lives. However, participants were reluctant to take on leadership roles within the Hopeful Justice Collective - due to lack of confidence and significant existing commitments - so the researchers were unsure whether it would continue beyond the life of the research project.

Conclusions

The researchers conclude that arts-based Transformative Justice approaches can build community connections and develop people's understanding of the social causes of criminalisation and how their communities can help. The team's recommendations include that a trauma-informed approach should be taken to community engagement, recognising the extent of experiences of adversity within communities. Community groups and arts-based approaches can play an important role in facilitating relationships and exploring complex issues, but they need financial support, and it is crucial to protect physical community spaces where residents can come together. Community groups need either volunteers or paid staff to lead and administer them, and such leaders should be properly supported with resources and skills development. The team further recommend longer timescales for evaluating the impact of projects, policy, and research, particularly given the time needed to build relationships with and within communities.

Key report

Transformative justice, women with convictions and uniting communities

6. Using administrative data to understand community well-being (Administrative Data)

Research team

Lasana Harris, University College London; Nonso Nnamoko, Edge Hill University; Saffron Woodcraft, University College London; Saite Lu, University of Cambridge; Jose Gana, University College London; Jack Procter, University College London and Edge Hill University; Mrinal Chaudhary, University College London

Motivation

This project explored the potential for local authorities to use existing administrative data about residents' behaviours to build an Artificial Intelligence (AI) that could provide insight about place-based 'community wellbeing', defined as 'the collective measure of a community's...ability to meet present and future social, material, and individual needs and aspirations'[92]. Administrative data refers to data collected and held by the public sector about a population; for local authorities this includes data such as library membership, parking charges, noise complaints, and data accessed by local authorities from UK Government sources, such as policing, health, and welfare data. The researchers sought to investigate the usefulness and feasibility for local authorities to use these rich data sources as an alternative to conducting costly surveys which can be ineffective in predicting behaviour if based on self-reported attitudes.

Method

The researchers reviewed literature on community wellbeing definitions and measurement frameworks. They held three workshops with stakeholders from government (e.g. Office for National Statistics) and community (e.g. SHIFT London), and academics, to explore the practical and ethical challenges of using administrative data and AI to gain insights into community wellbeing. They also partnered with officers at the London Borough of Camden and the Greater London Authority. The team used a model of community wellbeing that had previously been co-developed with citizen scientists in Camden, informed by local priorities and experiences, and encompassing many different aspects of life. They built an algorithm and developed a 'proof of concept' community wellbeing index and dashboard. The team then tested how well their algorithm predicted and explained differences in local economic performance for local authorities in England, based on a measure of 'labour productivity'. They chose the economic focus given current debates about the role of local economic growth in addressing regional inequalities. They compared the performance of their algorithm to traditional, subjective wellbeing measures. The researchers used synthetic data for privacy reasons, involving national and local, administrative and survey data; synthetic data is artificial data which maintains the statistical structure of an original dataset.

Findings

The literature review revealed a wide array of wellbeing definitions and measurement indices, mostly developed with little input from communities themselves. The team found that their community wellbeing index better predicted local economic performance than single measures of self-reported wellbeing. But they also found that local authorities do not currently have the data infrastructure to routinely use administrative data to measure community wellbeing, especially across data sets within and between different UK government agencies. Public concerns about government access to data on personal behaviour are a further significant barrier. The team emphasised that their own research using administrative data and AI is at an early stage, with limitations including in the underlying data used.

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92   The research team used this definition, informed by Wiseman and Brasher (2008) Community Wellbeing in an Unwell World: Trends, Challenges, and Possibilities. Journal of Public Health Policy, 29, 353-66.

Conclusions

The researchers conclude that there is great potential for local government to use existing administrative data and AI to better understand community wellbeing, in a cost-effective way. They argue that this will require improved linking of data sets and training in data science for local and central government staff, together with legal and policy reform which includes debating public data ownership and use, legal protection for data rights, and protection for those less able to exercise those rights. Further, community members, including marginalised groups, should have a key role to play in determining definitions of their own community wellbeing, who can access their data, and how those data are used. The researchers note that people seem more inclined to trust private companies than government with their personal data and therefore, if the use of AI technologies by the public sector is to be developed, this needs to be jointly decided with the public in an accessible and transparent way. There are also ethical concerns about bias in the underlying administrative datasets that AI relies on, which must be addressed. The team have produced guidance on tackling challenges with data, privacy, permission, and synthetic data, and on involving community stakeholders. They recommend further research including on how their community wellbeing index could usefully predict community resilience to economic shocks and which are the most important contributors to community wellbeing in a particular place, and therefore where support might best be targeted.

Key report

Using administrative data and artificial intelligence to understand community well-being

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