

Written evidence submitted by Local Trust to the House of Commons Committee on the Planning and Infrastructure Bill (PIB48).

Planning and Infrastructure Bill: Written evidence submitted by Local Trust

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill's reforms represent a once-in-a-generation opportunity to give communities the tools they need to thrive and ensure opportunities for growth are spread more evenly across the country. In its current form, however, the Bill does not go far enough to ensure the appropriate provision of community social infrastructure – the shared spaces, places and facilities that help bring people together.

This submission proposes a minor yet impactful amendment that would strengthen existing provisions for planning authorities to consider how to promote or improve the economic, social and environment well-being of an area. It summarises the evidence on how social infrastructure directly supports delivery of these objectives and would benefit communities, particularly in places where it is currently weakest.

Proposed amendment

Clause 47, page 66, line 7, at end insert “including through community social infrastructure”

Explanatory statement

This amendment would encourage strategic planning authorities to consider how community social infrastructure (i.e., community spaces and facilities) can both directly and indirectly support the economic, social or environmental well-being of the strategy area.

66

*Planning and Infrastructure Bill
Part 2 – Planning
Chapter 2 – Spatial development strategies*

- (4) A spatial development strategy may specify or describe infrastructure the provision of which the strategic planning authority considers to be of strategic importance to the strategy area for the purposes of—
- (a) supporting or facilitating development in that area,
 - (b) mitigating, or adapting to, climate change, or
 - (c) promoting or improving the economic, social or environmental well-being of that area.

5

Why community social infrastructure?

A rapid evidence review by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport found that community social infrastructure facilitates the development of vital social capital – the support and resources available to individuals and communities through their social networks and relationships.

This can be either:

- **Directly:** Where physical infrastructure is used to bring people together in one space, for example a community hub or green space.

- **Indirectly:** Where infrastructure enables individuals within a community to connect with one another (such as transport or digital connectivity).

Worryingly, the review also confirmed a decline in the volume and condition of this social infrastructure in recent years, marked by a “decrease in funding for, and closure of, civic institutions and community spaces.”

While this trend is national, its impact is most felt in communities which are both highly deprived and already lacking in community provision. In England, these doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods have the lowest density of places and spaces to meet, the weakest levels of community activity, and the poorest digital and transport connections. These factors compound existing levels of deprivation and lead to worse socio-economic outcomes across nearly every indicator.

The result is that local people are left feeling ignored and neglected by both the national and local state. Polling has shown residents in doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods identify community social infrastructure as the biggest resource they are not receiving their fair share of, even above other priorities like healthcare, transport, and job opportunities.

How community social infrastructure supports the economic well-being of an area

Community social infrastructure supports economic well-being by replenishing the stocks of human and social capital that are vital for economic growth. This is particularly crucial in places at a disadvantage when it comes to levels of education and skills. Outcomes from improving communities’ balance of social capital include both the benefits of increased employment as well as sizeable public spending savings.

As part of research into delivering ‘good jobs’ for doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the Centre for Progressive Policy found a “consistently positive relationship between investment in social capital or social infrastructure and economic growth.” Alongside building social and human capital, community places and spaces play an important role in stimulating local economies, providing job opportunities and creating environments that are more attractive for investment.

Policies and programmes can also support community initiatives to deliver effective social infrastructure. Frontier Economics was commissioned by Local Trust to provide an independent assessment of the economic basis for investment in social infrastructure and to quantify the potential scale of the economic, social and fiscal returns from these investments. Using only robust evidence and with conservative assumptions, the analysis found a £1m investment in a doubly disadvantaged neighbourhood would likely generate a corresponding £3.2m in social and economic benefits over a 10-year period.

How community social infrastructure supports the social well-being of an area

Social infrastructure functions as a builder and enabler of social capital and the community activity and association that flows from it. It provides the sites and means for strangers to meet and mix with others with whom they share their neighbourhood, enabling social connections and relationships to form and a sense of trust and shared purpose to develop.

In turn, these connections build social well-being and community cohesion. The existence of community spaces and local groups allow individuals to form stronger bonds with their neighbours, share information about their lives, and develop an understanding of each other's culture, needs and skills. This all contributes to making communities better able – and willing – to solve problems collectively. When people know their neighbours, take part in joint ventures and see that their communities are places where life prospects can improve, cohesive communities thrive.

Community social infrastructure can also support community resilience. For example, open and accessible places such as community hubs can provide a base for local community action and a focal point for a community's response to emerging challenges. By being rooted in and led by the local community, these bottom-up responses can adapt more rapidly to the needs of local people than top-down or nationally-run services, as well as filling in any gaps in local government provision. The vital importance of community-led efforts was illustrated throughout the Covid-19 pandemic by the creation and scaling up of mutual aid groups, and more recently in response to the cost-of-living crisis.

Finally, social infrastructure makes people feel more satisfied with their local area and positively impacts their sense of belonging. People's perceptions of an area are often related to ideas of whether its shared places and spaces well maintained. A study of Morriston (a relatively deprived area with a population of 30,000, almost 3 miles north of the centre of Swansea) found that residents' satisfaction with where they lived was not based on economic wellbeing alone. The presence of social infrastructure - parks, libraries, community hubs and high streets – was crucial to residents' sense of pride and the local identity of the area.

How community social infrastructure supports the environmental well-being of an area

Community-led projects and activities are already delivering real and meaningful environmental benefits to areas across the country, whether as a key motivating driver or a co-beneficiary of local community action. By contrast, limited social infrastructure within an area undermines the ability of communities to initiate and lead local climate action projects that can bring a range of immediate benefits and contribute to a post-carbon future.

In 2021, IPPR published a report on the capacity of communities across the country to respond to climate change. It stressed the importance of social infrastructure as a precondition to developing neighbourhood energy. It also found that, in those communities where social networks are weakest, there is limited chance residents will be able to take advantage of policies aimed at developing them. Similar research has also found that “community members with more associational memberships are more likely to participate in community energy projects”. In other words, active and engaged residents fostered through community social infrastructure are essential to kickstart clean energy projects.

Often, community action to build solidarity is focused on improving the local environment. Projects can include litter picking, tree-planting, reducing the number of derelict properties, painting murals and preventing fly-tipping. This not only improves the physical environment of the community but can also help to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour.

About Local Trust

Local Trust is an independent charity established in 2012. For more than a decade, we have been delivering Big Local, a neighbourhood regeneration programme aimed at pockets of the country that have historically been overlooked for funding. We work in 150 deprived neighbourhoods (with populations of 10,000 or fewer) across England, which have each received just over £1 million in funding from the National Lottery Community Fund. It is the largest neighbourhood-based investment programme since the last Labour government's New Deal for Communities.

Big Local provides success stories of building confidence and capacity in the most deprived neighbourhoods. The long-term evaluation of the programme outlines, above all, just how important social infrastructure is to achieving change in the places that need it most.

Case Study: Heart of Sidley Big Local

Set close to the South Downs, just inland from the popular tourist destination of Bexhill-on-Sea, the village of Sidley lacks places to meet and venues for hosting activities. Whilst the area has retained shops on its high street, a lot of its social infrastructure has crumbled over the years. Local sports facilities have closed, many community spaces have been repurposed, and accessible venues are hard to find.

Sidley's community also faces significant challenges from deprivation, with the area home to one doubly disadvantaged neighbourhood. Unemployment is double the average for the local authority and wider South East, with almost a quarter of the population holding no qualifications. Twice as many working-age residents receive Personal Independence Payments compared to the national average.

In 2012, Heart of Sidley Big Local was set up to regenerate the neighbourhood, backed by just over £1 million of long-term funding and support through the Big Local programme. The resident-led partnership's driving vision was summed up by three words: act, belong and commit. They wanted people to be actively involved in, and proud to belong to, a community committed to its future.

Building strong links with the local community, businesses and community organisations helped the partnership establish a positive profile with residents, councillors and other stakeholders. With the certainty of long-term funding, their confidence and capacity grew to take on larger projects and take advantage of government programmes. The partnership consulted widely to understand what facilities local residents most wanted: a permanent community space. After initial plans to acquire another site proved difficult, they decided to focus on Sidley Rec and partnered with Rother District Council to ensure a strong legacy.

In 2023, the Heart of Sidley Big Local partnership successfully bid for Levelling Up funding to build a revenue-generating all-weather football pitch and convert an old changing room and bathroom block into a community hub and café. The partnership represented the community during the hub's rapid design process to ensure it fully met their needs – for example, wheelchair users advised the partnership to ensure accessibility and inclusion. The result is an asset that will support sustainable community activity well into the future.