



Local Trust
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national network
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improvement

Social capital: A St George's House consultation

June 2025

Local Trust

About this report

This report summarises the discussion at a consultation event organised by St George's House, Windsor and Local Trust in March 2025. The event gathered a range of experts on social capital including academics, policymakers and representatives of community and civil society organisations. It reviewed the current state of social capital in the UK, as well as to what extent the concept has been mainstreamed into policy programmes and initiatives at national, regional and sub-regional levels. The discussion went on to consider how social capital should be built and maintained going forward, with an emphasis on its importance for fostering healthy and resilient communities. This report aims to reflect the consensus that emerged from these discussions and not the detailed policy positions of all the organisations that participated.

Authorship

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Front Cover: Thurrock Pride Festival 2024

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Introduction

In the 25th anniversary year of the publication of Robert Putnam's seminal book 'Bowling Alone', social capital is back on the map. Increasingly, it is becoming recognised for its role in providing the civic and social foundation to achieving Labour's missions for government – fostering the social networks, supporting the local associational activity, and building the community capacity and trust needed to improve health, education, crime and other outcomes from the bottom up.

But for nearly 15 years, supporting the development of social capital to improve individual, community and national prospects has received less attention from national and sub-national policymakers alike (Haldane and Halpern, 2025). Resources for neighbourhood level interventions, where social capital is incubated, built and maintained, have been squeezed. The social infrastructure which has historically been the foundation of social capital – the shared local workplaces, community groups, trade unions, clubs, societies and associations of industrial Britain – has been in decline or shut up shop.

Hope is not lost. Examples like the Big Local programme provide an example of what reweaving social bonds and trust looks like in the current landscape. Evidence from this innovative but highly pragmatic initiative shows that when local people are given a relatively small amount of money and are put in charge of how to spend it, the result is often an increase in social capital – even where this was not an explicit goal. In practice, this means that most of the 150 Big Local

areas in England have prioritised rebuilding social infrastructure to enable its growth and retention – the hubs and spaces, community groups and organisations, as well as physical and digital connections that enable people to meet, develop shared norms and trust and work collectively for their mutual benefit.

To build on and inform the development of social capital-based programmes and initiatives, Local Trust and 3ni hosted a consultation in March 2025 at St George's House, Windsor Castle. The event brought together over 20 experts from academia, local government, policymaking and the community frontlines to discuss social capital and its role in building healthy, prosperous and cohesive neighbourhoods.

This report is a summary of the discussion at the St George's House social capital consultation and is structured according to the main themes covered by participants. Each session was introduced by presentations from those with expertise on the topic, either because they had first-hand lived experience of community leadership or their role as a researcher or policy expert. The presentations were followed by a broader discussion involving all participants to widen the scope of evidence and insight. The report closes with a summary of recommendations on how to cement social capital's central position in public policy debate, particularly as a means to achieve socioeconomic change in disadvantaged and disinvested neighbourhoods across England.

About the Big Local programme

Big Local is a programme funded by The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF). It is a unique programme that puts residents across England in control of decisions about their own lives and neighbourhoods.

In 2011, the NLCF awarded £1m to each of 150 Big Local areas. As a result of their collective decision to pool and invest the money they didn't immediately need, each area subsequently went on to receive an additional £150K.

The Big Local programme was designed to reach communities that had not historically received Lottery money or public funding. The areas chosen were amongst the 20 per cent most deprived on the Index of Multiple Deprivation and also lacked civic assets. The hypothesis was that they were not receiving their fair share of funding because they lacked organisations and individuals with the knowledge, skills and contacts to raise it.

From the outset, Big Local was designed to be radically different from other funding programmes. Contrasting with conventional, top down, time-limited, project-led funding, awards were made to Big Local areas on the basis that they could be spent over time, at communities' own pace, and according to their own plans and priorities.

The Big Local programme is now in its final phase, with all areas contracted to have spent their funding by 2026. After this date, some Big Local projects will continue through new, independent organisations set up by Big Local partnerships.

What is social capital and why does it matter?

During the first session, participants reviewed the current state of social capital theory and practice in England, as well as the direct experiences of communities on the ground. There were three distinct parts to the discussion: the first covered the origin and development of the definition of social capital; second, the depth at which social capital has been embedded and integrated into policy debate and practice and; thirdly, how the concept and use of social capital has been disrupted since it first emerged, as a result of evolving social, political and economic contexts.

1) Definition

Social capital shifted from being an academic concept to a tool and driver of public policy in the mid to late 1990s onwards. Targeted measures to build social capital became mainstreamed into many state-led and delivered social policies, which in the UK was led by New Labour's National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal.

A wave of work in international development in the 2000s followed suit which put the concept to further practical use, with a focus on building social capital in developing economies. This was primarily done in pursuit of achieving other outcomes such as better employment, education and health for the most disadvantaged individuals and communities. This work further developed theories and definitions of social capital whilst consolidating its role as a key facet of public policy.

Definitions of social capital have since varied across time and space but tend to coalesce around the sense that it is a sum of “the resources available to individuals and communities through their social networks, ties and social support” (Kawachi et al, 2008). Although social networks and support can be seen as too “messy” or intangible, it is crucial to the smooth functioning of society: when citizens get along with each other independently, their wellbeing, mental health and satisfaction with where they live produces happier, healthier and more stable communities.

A key for practical policy use is the role social networks and trust can play in delivering more tangible, material benefits for individuals like job opportunities or access to services. It is widely acknowledged that social capital can improve socioeconomic outcomes for individuals and communities through its three different functions:

- **Bonding** social capital captures the relationships and networks that bind people within a community together, particularly those which are similar in background or social class (Coutts et al, 2025).
- **Bridging** social capital creates connections between different groups or communities, who might be different from one another but share an understanding that working collectively will bring mutual benefit (Coutts et al, 2025).
- **Linking** social capital is an extension of bridging capital but involves bridging individuals with institutions or organisations that hold power and agency, for example public agencies or corporate actors (Claridge, 2018).

One development over the past five years has been a renewed focus on identifying the process by which people and communities develop “positive, pro-social” social capital. One participant explained that rising support for identitarian parties and political programmes that emphasise difference and division points to the need for a definition of social capital that is explicitly inclusive of the diverse groups and individuals that might live and work in a given neighbourhood, whilst also making sure every community is well connected with a wider

geography. The experiences of refugees who face rejection and discrimination from the long term residents of a small mining village in Ken Loach's film 'The Royal Oak' was referenced as an example of how high levels of bonding capital, without the bridges between different groups and the wider world outside, can lead to stagnant and divided communities that cannot respond to social and economic challenges. Explicit work on the balance of bonding, bridging and linking necessary to support neighbourhoods to combat potential or growing social division was a suggested avenue for researchers who want to contribute towards developing targeted, impactful social capital interventions.

2) Depth

Understanding of social capital's foundational role in delivering better socioeconomic outcomes and quality of life has not been embedded deep enough into public policy and, therefore, is at-risk of being overlooked. One participant noted that "the function and role of communities has been forgotten" by policymakers at every level. In recent years, explicit programmes supporting social capital accumulation have been largely absent from government policy and funding initiatives in England.

There was concern amongst participants that the current financial crisis in local government would accelerate the retreat of state funding from many neighbourhood-level projects, spaces, facilities and services – threatening to unpick the foundations of social bonding that still exist. There has also been a lack of national-level neighbourhood policy to date and limited integration of social capital into the current administration's missions for government.

Despite this, community-led initiatives and projects are often acutely aware of the importance of social capital for making their areas better places to live and work. Neighbourhood groups and organisations like Northern Heart and Soul CIC have worked hard to develop social networks, trust and relationships, often with limited support from local government and larger, more established voluntary

sector organisations. Such grassroots organisations feel that they are working against the grain by making the growth and nourishment of social relationships the focus of their work.

When funding programmes are available to support them, they are predominantly short-term and restricted. This limits the ability of many small, grassroots organisations to build an evidence case that could be put to government or other funders on role of neighbourhood-level, resident-led approaches to building social capital because “this is long term, incremental work where results might not be seen for 10, 20 years”.

All of the community representatives present stressed that social capital building requires timelines that extend beyond the budgetary reviews and electoral cycles that shape the length of time government and funders often give them to spend money and deliver initiatives. With funders, implementers and evaluators pressured into delivering impact data on short time scales, many community initiatives are often simply not given enough time to deliver and therefore are not understood or evaluated appropriately.

Examples were given of community approaches that aim to buck that trend and model long time frames, like The Portland Inn Project’s 100 year plan and East Marsh United’s plan for 100 homes in 100 years. Participants advocated for longer term, patient and flexible funding programmes that would enable a tide shift and support communities up and down the country to build social capital on timeframes and scales that make most sense to them. And, in doing so, supporting a growing bank of data and research on the value of neighbourhood scale social capital investment.

Meanwhile, the availability of new data, whether through social network analysis of social media data or hyper-local metrics, has the potential to breathe new life into our understanding and analysis of social capital. It offers the opportunity to monitor the impact of future long term neighbourhood initiatives on building social capital. Nationally, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport’s (DCMS) Community Life Survey covers indicators like trust, belonging and

support networks that many participants agreed are useful proxies for social capital. OCSI's Community Needs Index maps community need and levels of neighbourhood social infrastructure below the ward level. Participants agreed that there is a need to harness and build on such data assets as part of developing a robust evidence case on the role of social capital in delivering lasting change for individuals and neighbourhoods that need it most.

3) Disruption

Since the initial iteration of social capital policy and practice we have seen fundamental changes to the UK's social and economic landscape, requiring the concept to be adapted for proper use today. It was observed that the growth of distrust in democratic and public institutions that has occurred across England is often higher in the poorest areas (Carnegie, 2025). Rebuilding social capital might be a way of restoring that trust, but participants stressed that this would only be the case if it is a project led and owned by local communities themselves, not something imposed through top-down interventions.

Both the Big Local programme and other neighbourhood initiatives in England have shown the importance of community leadership in growing and nourishing the social networks that make areas better places to live and work. Building social capital requires intimate knowledge of the people and communities in which it exists – knowledge and understanding that, many stressed, is often only held within that very community itself. Community leaders talked about the fact that events, activities and approaches that have worked to rebuild social capital in their neighbourhoods had been contingent on the needs, desires and expertise of people locally. Future social capital programmes, therefore, must put community leadership at the heart of design and delivery: to harness the expertise of local people, ensure that programmes reflect local characteristics, and effectively build social capital.

An international expert who attended the consultation from the United States (US) remarked that, in comparison, the UK has experimented relatively little with allowing communities and local groups to set their own funding priorities and oversee the development of local activities and services. They remarked that this is not regarded as politically sensitive in the US and is common across both red and blue states as a way to support public and democratic engagement, accountability and trust in institutions and services. Collating and distilling learning from international examples was therefore regarded as way to support an upswing in community-led social capital building initiatives at home.

Case study

A community-led approach to building social capital

One community leader presented their experience as part of a resident-led partnership that regenerated disused and disinvested allotments. Trust in the local authority to improve the site was low after they had been derelict for nearly fifteen years, cemented by initial obstruction by council officials of the regeneration project. Local residents wanted more accessible green spaces locally and because they had unrestricted, independent resource from the Big Local programme were able to go ahead anyway. They collectively decided on a plan to develop a community allotment, and took ownership of clearing, tidying and planting it afresh.

After some time the allotments became one of a few go-to sites for local people to come and spend time outside together and support one another. With the positive impact on the local area undeniable, the local authority came to the table and offered to support the upkeep of the allotments. Long term funding with residents in control of the spend had helped to rebalance the relationship between the local government and local people. Council officers now take the resident-led group and their central aim to build local social networks more seriously.

What is the current state of social capital in England?

Evidence presented to inform the discussion showed that trends in social capital are nuanced and complex. A review by Halpern in 2005 showed a downward trend in social capital from the 1960s to the millennium, as measured by levels of social trust, social interaction and other metrics like naming trends which have been found to reflect the extent to which society is individualistic.

More recent work monitoring similar metrics, however, suggests that the rate of erosion is less pronounced than in the United States. In fact, levels of social trust have actually increased across all income and age groups in the UK (Haldane and Halpern, 2025). The problem is the significant amount of geographic variation across England itself (Haldane and Halpern, 2025). This variation is largely intra-regional, and often most pronounced at the neighbourhood scale – between communities that might be adjacent to one another but have very different levels of access to social infrastructure and the other building blocks to healthy social capital (Haldane and Halpern, 2025). This means that peoples' access to social networks and relationships is largely shaped by the neighbourhood they live and work in.

The Community Needs Index, developed by OCSI for Local Trust in 2019, allows for greater understanding of area-based variation in social capital. It maps social infrastructure in England across three domains: civic assets; connectedness and levels of third sector and community activity. These domains capture the community places, groups and connections that form the basis of social capital creation and retention. With the condition and health of social infrastructure serving as a rough proxy for social capital, areas that

are identified in the bottom 10 per cent of the CNI are likely to have the least social capital in the country. There is a strong relationship between deprivation and a lack of social infrastructure, with the 10 per cent of areas where levels of social infrastructure are lowest having the highest average deprivation score (Local Insight, 2025). Recent analysis shows that there are a total of 1315 Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) which suffer from this so-called “double disadvantage” of low social infrastructure and acute deprivation.

Many of these LSOAs correlate to the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods’ (2025) ‘mission critical neighbourhoods’: these are the communities which require targeted support to make progress on Labour’s missions for government which include improving social mobility and health, lowering crime, meeting Net Zero and securing economic growth.

Building on this, research was presented to participants utilising data from a social media platform on the distribution of social networks across the UK (Behavioural Insights Team, 2025). Its findings suggest significant overlap with both the CNI and ICON’s evidence on which neighbourhoods are suffering the most from an unravelled social fabric. It showed that neighbourhoods in England’s North-West, North-East and West Midlands, particularly those which have experienced deindustrialisation since the 1980s, have the least social capital in the country. Levels of economic connectedness (measured by numbers of cross-class friendships people had on social media) were much lower in these regions.

But experts also hinted at a potential way that building social capital could improve outcomes in such communities. People with a greater number of digital friendships that stretch across socioeconomic classes were found to have the highest upward mobility. In fact, apart from income and higher education, cross-class friendships are the most important factor for lifting an individual out of poverty. The most important sites for social capital that bridges socioeconomic groups tended to be hobby groups and clubs. This suggests that

social infrastructure can support the growth of bridging capital within and between communities, enabling people to gain opportunities and services they otherwise would not have access to.

A number of participants did question whether social media-based research is able to capture the quality and depth of connection that is necessary for some of the important functions of social capital like trust, mutual understanding and reciprocity to kindle and grow. Arguably, however, the data and analysis does feed into a wider body of research on the role of social capital in improving economic indicators for individuals and communities which have experienced long term disinvestment and decline.

How can social capital be built and how should that work be resourced?

The final session focused on developing practical policy interventions to support the growth of social capital in every part of England. There was consensus that embedding social capital into every government policy and service would win back peoples' trust, foster better socioeconomic outcomes and enable the development of preventative approaches to key challenges.

Mainstreaming social capital growth and retention as part of the role and function of public service delivery was regarded as part of the shift towards a more relational, human-focused approach. One which actively involves community groups and organisations in designing services based on local need and grants local people access to places and spaces that enable reciprocal, mutual support networks to develop and grow.

However, a social capital model of public service delivery is not currently possible England-wide. This is because of the acute social infrastructure deficit in doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Detailed research from Aldrich (2023), for example, shows that social infrastructure plays a fundamental role in building and retaining bridging social capital. One expert explained that parks, pubs and sports grounds in particular are important for building bridging capital. Without support, doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods will lack the places and spaces and community groups and organisations to work with public services in pursuit of better

socioeconomic outcomes (Local Trust, 2023). Disparities in education, employment, health and wellbeing outcomes between them and neighbourhoods with an existing base of social infrastructure will continue to grow (Local Trust, 2024).

One participant stressed the need for policymakers to regard “social infrastructure as a form of foundational infrastructure”, one which “mitigates against unequal socio-economic outcomes, connects people to each other and wider opportunities and reduces social division”. It should, therefore, target inequalities in access to it as government would seek to do for “any other type of infrastructure”.

Targeted social infrastructure investment and support, therefore, was identified as the first step to building positive social capital in areas where it has been most eroded. Participants generally agreed that central government should catalyse this agenda through providing targeted seed funding for social infrastructure projects, with a focus on doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Participants also agreed this funding should be delivered over a 10-15 year period, offering patience and flex for these areas to learn and grow. A focus of the funding programme should be on identifying and equipping community leaders to build the necessary resident-led partnerships and other neighbourhood infrastructure to take collective decisions on how social capital should be nurtured locally.

It was agreed that central government should take responsibility for social capital growth for two main reasons. The first is due to its foundational role in achieving Labour’s missions for government. Social capital was regarded as a “method” for catalysing better health, education, growth and reducing crime “rather than just an outcome of its own”. Doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods “are least close to achieving government’s missions and therefore need to be pump-primed to get us over the line”. Health and the shift to a Neighbourhood Health Service was mentioned as a striking example. Social capital and infrastructure will be the foundation of a preventative system where health is created in neighbourhoods,

dealing with problems in communities before they reach crisis point whilst unlocking resource from costly emergency services (Local Trust and NHS Confed, 2024). One participant explained that the long term nature of social capital building can disincentivise government officials and politicians to support it when the immediate challenges of waiting lists and ambulance times hit their desk, but that, ultimately, the choice is between “pay now” to build the social networks and support needed for a more responsive, proactive health system, or, “pay a lot more later” when the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods suffer from an even higher concentration of acute health challenges like cancer and heart disease.

The second reason that central government was identified as the funding agent for social capital growth was to support community capacity building. This was based on evidence from the Big Local programme and other neighbourhood initiatives that direct funding and support to communities enables them to form the networks, experience and confidence necessary to engage with local statutory partners. Community representatives explained that many deprived neighbourhoods feel forgotten or neglected by local government – an outcome of 15 years of cuts and service closure – and therefore need support and resource to build back trust and understanding. Participants agreed that local government should play a secondary, supportive role rather than an active delivery agent because this will enable “partnerships and co-production that cannot happen if they are perceived to hold and manage funding that should be going to communities directly.” This would be an important step in restoring relations between local government and neighbourhoods in many places where it has been lost and “build capacity [for them] to meet on more equal terms”.

After government secures a baseline level of resource for building social capital in doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods, community initiatives will need to be supported to become sustainable and grow to self-sufficiency. This was regarded as the only way to ensure that this agenda becomes embedded at the neighbourhood level,

protecting against future policy or government changes that threaten to undermine it. In the medium term, whilst communities are still in receipt of government funding, they will require flexible, responsive support for community leaders and volunteers in neighbourhoods to upskill and ensure the sustainability of locally developed projects and activities.

Alternative neighbourhood-led financing models to secure that long term sustainability were briefly explored, with the caveat that this will need to be tailored to each neighbourhood and their specific needs. Examples included the Waqf endowment (an inalienable charitable endowment under Islamic law) and a social mortgage model used in New York City to fund the now famed High Line. One participant explained that their community had developed a 'People's Lottery' model that had raised £2,500 in just over six months to fund social and craft activities. It was suggested that neighbourhood-based sustainable funding models be researched in further detail to ensure social capital is adequately resourced in the future.

What's next?

1. Develop and collate practical, evidence-based approaches that mainstream social capital across public services.

One participant made the case that, to be practically useful, the concept of social capital needs to be extracted from academic literature and refined in relation to specific policy contexts. They suggested that this could involve starting with specific socioeconomic challenges (unemployment or poor health, for example), undertaking detailed analysis of their relational components and how they play a fundamental role in addressing it. This would probe deeper discussions about the way government and the public services it delivers operate, and how social capital growth and retention might be embedded to improve public satisfaction and secure better results.

For public, private and voluntary and community sector organisations with a stake in catalysing this agenda, an important first step might be the development of a playbook containing detailed examples of social capital-based models of service delivery and their impact in different parts of the country. Pockets of good practice exist – their learning needs to be more widely understood and key principles underlying impactful intervention distilled and shared. This is particularly the case with regard to the role of social capital in improving the prospects of doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This would make a stronger case to policymakers at every level that investment in social capital and the infrastructure that grows and nurtures it will support delivery on Labour's missions for government.

2. Form a coalition of the willing to bring social capital to the heart of policy debate.

There was a desire to form a “policy or political home” for stakeholders advocating for social capital investment and support. The development of a “coalition of the willing” would bring together community leaders from neighbourhoods where it is currently least supported and resourced with politicians, public and voluntary sector who are passionate about developing practical policy proposals to rebuild it in pursuit of socioeconomic change. There was mention that this coalition should engage with the private sector and begin to explore its role in supporting the retention of resources and assets in deprived communities – with relationships and social capital understood as a central strand of this.

There was particular emphasis on developing a coalition that is able to bring together those pushing for investment and support in social infrastructure and individuals and organisations involved in other critical, everyday infrastructures like housing, utilities and transport. This would have the potential to unlock budgets, expertise and other resources that could be harnessed and deployed to support the growth and development of social infrastructure in areas previously overlooked.

Developing a coalition that is self-sufficient and able to take ownership of the push to bring social capital back into the heart of public policy was also regarded as important given the fact that Local Trust, administrator of the Big Local programme that has been convening stakeholders around this topic for the past five years, will be closing by December 2026. There is, therefore, a need for remaining stakeholders to carry the flame and make sure social capital is an enduring part of public policy debate and practice.

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About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources, and decision making into the hands of communities.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding, and to draw on the learning from our work delivering the Big Local programme to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

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About 3ni

The national network for neighbourhood improvement is a new learning network for local government and the wider public sector that supports policy and practice towards community-led regeneration. It was incubated and hosted by Local Trust in 2024.

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