

The logo for 3ni, featuring a green square with the number '3' and the letters 'ni' in white.

national network
for neighbourhood
improvement

Connecting Communities:

Insights from the North East
social capital summit



**CONNECTING
COMMUNITIES**

The North East Social Capital Summit

INSIGHTS
North East

**NEW
ECONOMICS
FOUNDATION**

NE North East
Combined
Authority

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trusting
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people



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About this report

3ni is a new social value partnership, bringing together policy and practice to transform neighbourhoods across the country. By creating a space for collaboration and innovation, we're working with local government and the wider public sector to drive meaningful, lasting change where it's needed most. At 3ni, we believe that real transformation starts from the ground up. Through our national network for neighbourhood improvement, we're sharing and shaping the best and next practices that help rebuild disadvantaged communities. Our research, events, and activities are designed to support local government and public sector partners in learning what works—and, more importantly, putting it into action.

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Front cover and inside: North East social capital summit, October 2025
All photos: Von Fox Promotions



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North East Social Capital Summit 2025

On October 22nd, the first North East Social Capital Summit took place at the Glasshouse in Gateshead, hosted by 3ni in collaboration with Local Trust, the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (ICON), the North East Combined Authority, New Economics Foundation and Insights North East. Bringing together nearly 300 people from local authorities, community organisations, social businesses and charities, the summit was a concerted effort to take stock of the current state of social capital in the region and identify how to build strong, resilient neighbourhoods in every part of the North East.

Welcomed by Easington Colliery Brass Band, participants reflected on the historic foundations of social capital in the region – the trade unions, co-operatives, social clubs, allotments and women’s institutes that were formed by communities to support one another when lives were dominated by mines, shipyards and steelworks. This was accompanied by recognition of the scale of industrial decline, and the rounds of government austerity following the 2008 financial crisis, which, keynote speaker Baroness Armstrong explained, “have taken a hammer to a lot of [the] social infrastructure” which, in the past, had brought people and communities together.

Yet amongst this challenging landscape, local people in neighbourhoods across the North East have found different ways of building social connection. Many have had to work against the grain to identify where energy is locally, drawing on the latent skills, experience and knowledge of residents to unite neighbours and reweave social networks that can withstand external pressures and change. It was on this commitment, entrepreneurship and solidarity that the summit focussed. Participants and panellists positioned their role as aiming to enhance an existing movement across the North East, one that is

dedicated to rebuilding the community hubs, pubs, theatres and play parks that bring local people together and help them to form positive relationships and networks that last.

As England's very first social capital summit, the event reflected growing interest in and commitment to bring social capital to the forefront of the regional and national policy agenda. Andrew O'Brien, Head of Secretariat for ICON, explained that we are entering a "new neighbourhood moment" in government policymaking: an attempt to address political instability as well as increasing recognition that when the "state is too directive [it] will crush" the community initiatives that bring people together and give them the power and capacity to shape decisions on issues that matter most to them.

This is most clearly manifested in the Pride in Place programme, officially launched by national government a month prior to the summit. A promising step change, Pride in Place aims to give "communities the resources and tools to drive change themselves and shape their neighbourhoods for the better...[through] delivering funding directly to the neighbourhoods that need it most" (MHCLG, 2025).

The work of ICON and the Government's Pride in Place programme recognise that strong neighbourhoods and communities are vital to driving growth, making the link between strong social capital and improved outcomes across health, wellbeing, education, and employment.

But evidence brought directly from community groups, organisations and funders to the Summit underscored the need to cede power as well as resources to make sure hyper-local neighbourhood programmes like Pride in Place have a lasting impact. Central government's implementation of Pride in Place should learn from the many examples from across the North East that put local people in the driving seat and develop the activities, events and groups which bring community spaces to life and rekindle bonds that turn a stranger into a neighbour, an acquaintance into a friend.

A community cafe building social connection

REFUSE, Chester-le-Street case study

“This is transformation. Food can be a way to build bridges and bring people together. It’s a social glue that can transform how we feel about ourselves and our neighborhoods and the places we live.” Nikki Dravers.

Ten years ago, Nikki founded REFUSE, beginning with “nightly jaunts out to rummage through the bins behind local supermarkets and feed our neighbours with the treasures that we found in them”. Today, REFUSE occupies a high street shop in Chester-le-Street, serving around 90 meals a day on a Pay As You Feel basis. Guests contribute time, money, or skills with no stigma or judgment, whilst surplus food collected from supermarkets forms the basis of a healthy and daily-changing menu.

The café is supported by over 150 volunteers and a flexible staff team, running schools’ programmes, supper nights, fruit and veg boxes, catering, and food skills training. This approach builds agency, confidence, and social connection. Whether clearing tables, supporting parents, or improving the IT systems, the cafe has helped people transition into work and even start their own businesses.

REFUSE operates against a backdrop of systemic food insecurity in the North East, where many people cannot afford or access good food and diet-related diseases are the leading cause of preventable early mortality. Over the past two years, Nikki has helped establish the Gateshead Food Partnership, supported by Gateshead Council. It brings together 180 members and 80 organisations committed to a shared vision: improving access to healthy, nutritious food, moving from food aid reliance to food justice, building a diverse local economy and ensuring environmental sustainability.

Nikki reflected on the wider implications: “Over the past two years, I’ve seen the potential of what it might look like to build an effective partnership between voluntary sector organisations like REFUSE and local authority public services and local businesses. Working together, listening to each other, holding each other to account, and looking at food as a tool that can tackle health, environment, economy, society, and education - that’s the way forward.”

In context: Social capital in the North East

The first session analysed the root of social capital and the resurgence of its use and deployment over the past five years. It kicked off with a review of the concept by Dan Crowe, Director of 3ni, the network for neighbourhood improvement that works to put social capital into the heart of local authority policy and practice. Initially developed by Robert Putnam in his seminal work *Bowling Alone* to explain rising disconnection between family, friends and neighbours across the US, Dan explained how the concept has been developed and refined for a UK context. Academic and policy research at home has linked social capital with improving social and economic outcomes at the national, regional and neighbourhood levels.



The connection between strong social capital and improved economic inclusion and sustainable growth is well-established. In *The Hidden Wealth of Nations 2025*, Andy Haldane and David Halpern reviewed the evidence on the role of social capital in fuelling economic growth and community wellbeing. They explain that the causal mechanisms through which social capital boosts economic growth have been identified by researchers and include: improved information flows; lower transaction costs (being able to seal a deal with a handshake); improved labour market functioning (employing the best person for the job, rather than a known family member); and higher trust leading to stronger institutions and more investment in public goods (Haldane and Halpern, 2025).

A series of papers published by Demos earlier this year interrogated the role of social capital in improving outcomes at the neighbourhood level. It highlighted the role of social capital in supporting health and creating a protective shield for children and families, to addressing crime and producing a virtuous cycle of economic growth and wellbeing (Demos, Local Trust and 3ni, 2025). Initially commissioned by 3ni to support local authorities facing financial constraints coupled with rising public service demand, the papers provide evidence to support a new emphasis on social capital in both policy development and delivery.

Panellist Prof John Tomaney explained, however, that social capital also speaks to deeper, “very human needs” for connection and belief in the possibility of collective action. Discussing research conducted by UCL on the decline and revival of social infrastructure in one Durham pit village, Sacriston, and the impact of Space North East, a network of peer-to-peer support groups for men in and around Sunderland, he explained that loneliness and isolation are feelings that often shape the experiences of people who live in areas which have been described as ‘left behind’. He went on to discuss the contemporary relevance of Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt, whose interventions described loneliness as a modern phenomenon caused by people uprooted and isolated from their communities. At a time of increasing fragmentation and polarisation, a community’s connections were agreed upon by many participants as an inoculant against divisive narratives that threaten to pull them apart.



Across the Summit, the breadth of creative ways that communities are building and nourishing social connection to bridge people from different experiences, backgrounds and identities came to the forefront. Research and evidence on many of these initiatives showed that when communities are given the power and resource to build social capital, they do it in bespoke ways that are tailored to the needs and ambitions of local people. Examples from communities in the North East who have benefitted from long term, patient and resident-led funding as part of the Big Local programme provided the Summit with a glimpse of the drive, energy and enthusiasm for restoring and building social capital in areas like Whitley Bay, Jarrow, and Bishop Auckland. From resurrecting annual carnivals, getting neighbours into shared gardens and allotments, to bringing people together in community choirs and walking groups, Rachel Rowney, Chief Executive of Local Trust, the organisation set up to deliver the Big Local programme, explained that research shows “it doesn’t matter what [communities] do per se, it’s the process of getting people around the table that gets them connected and rebuilding relationships that matters”.

Participants agreed that social capital is best developed and strengthened by engaging at the hyperlocal level, in our neighbourhoods and with our neighbours. In a session on why neighbourhoods, their role as the principal site for social capital building and retention was underlined. Professor Sarah Pearson, Dean of Research at Sheffield Hallam University and Co-Director of the Centre for Collaboration in Community Connectedness (C4), presented learning from her work researching neighbourhood programmes including the Big Local programme and the previous Labour government's New Deal for Communities. She explained that evaluations on these programmes highlighted measurable benefits for investing in social capital at the neighbourhood level. Largely, this is due to the "very basic fact of living in a neighbourhood where people have the opportunity to connect and address the social challenges they are facing together."

Discussions also included examples from the work of community organisations and groups – revealing the practicalities of building and retaining neighbourhood-level social capital. The presence of one component of social infrastructure – places and spaces – was widely agreed as critical. Buildings and green spaces like community centres, hubs, boxing gyms, cafes and football pitches provide lasting opportunities for people to meet and connect. They provide a physical place where community groups can convene, overlap and work together, offering a basis for activity that is visible and accessible to everyone who lives in that area.

But participants also stressed that communities are not homogenous: social capital building is most effective when it is able to reach across the many different people and groups who share a neighbourhood. High quality and effective community spaces need to be complemented by capacity building, training and support for the community organisations and development workers who fill them and make them come alive. Building local peoples' tools and capacity to engage with one another – something often termed relational infrastructure – was regarded as an aspect of this agenda that is often overlooked but one which is particularly important in the current context of widening social isolation and fragmentation.



Other workshops unpacked how three topics – the foundational economy, opportunities for young people, and access to arts and culture – can be addressed through the lens of social capital. All showed that mainstreaming social capital in policy has the potential to unlock community-led, relational approaches to social issues – from expanding the role of the local cooperative sector in social care to retain wealth in the region, to supporting community-led employment support to widen the opportunities available to young people.

Across all three, there was a particular emphasis the ongoing need for a research ecosystem that bridges academic understanding and practical application. Rather than purely theoretical frameworks, this means developing tools, methods and evidence that practitioners and policymakers can actually use to build and measure social capital. There was particular interest in creating accessible ways to capture the impact of community projects – not just traditional outputs, but the relationships built and social connections made that underpin thriving neighbourhoods.

A multicultural youth and community hub unlocking hope and opportunity

Young Asian Voices, Sunderland case study

Nearly thirty years ago, Young Asian Voices (YAV) was founded to address the absence of social support and provision for young Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities in Sunderland. YAV began by offering a safe environment where young people could gather, learn, and feel they belonged. Today, it is a fully inclusive youth and community organisation working with over 450 members each week across more than 40 sessions.

Inside YAV's community centre, the atmosphere is vibrant. Junior and youth sessions run alongside sports programmes, holiday clubs, volunteering opportunities and one-to-one support. Young people contribute ideas, time, and leadership, while staff and volunteers create an environment where everyone is welcome, regardless of language, background, gender, or faith. In recent years, they have welcomed refugees now living in Sunderland.

Much of the weekly menu responds to the realities young people face: to build their confidence, support them into future employment, and improve their wellbeing. YAV has directly supported over 300 young people across training, education and outreach, youth sessions and community integration. Their approach is holistic by design: alongside youth activities, tailored support and education helps young people navigate the complex social pressures surrounding racism, integration, and belonging. Against a backdrop of structural inequalities affecting many communities in Sunderland, YAV provides a space where young people can develop a better sense of self and community.

Strong partnerships have allowed YAV to scale up their programmes, and they now deliver a range of longer term projects across the city and region. They have worked closely with local and national partners, from the Sunderland City Council to the Department for Education, while securing funding from a variety of foundations and charities. These partnerships have enabled them to build the trust and space to deliver more across the region, strengthening confidence not just in individuals but across families and neighbourhoods.

A social capital action plan

The Summit was not just an opportunity to connect and share insight, it was also a first step towards developing a social capital action plan for the North East region. Baroness Armstrong, who provided the keynote speech, challenged attendees to identify practical policy proposals which would “build up the foundations of communities so that they can develop and operate based on their own capabilities.”

Baroness Armstrong attended the Summit to represent the work of Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods, set up last autumn to review the current state of neighbourhoods in England and make the case for a new focus on neighbourhoods in national policy as a means of addressing multiple disadvantage, regenerating communities and enabling government to achieve its mission objectives. Her work as Chair of ICON involved visiting communities across the North East to understand the challenges they face, but also the innovative ways that local people have rebuilt and developed the community centres, hubs, clubs and cafes that provide the scaffolding for social connection. Baroness Armstrong explained that preliminary findings from ICON’s research showed that:

“We need to help and support local people to develop the social infrastructure in their community - the sports clubs and community centres. In many places, social infrastructure is battered: not visible, not usable... But in each place [communities] have found a different way of building social connection. Local people can be really creative when they do get the support and confidence they need. Many often don’t trust the state - when it intervenes [the next generation of neighbourhood programmes have] to do so in a way that enables strength and agency of local people.”



Drawing on both reflections from ICON's work in the region and insights from workshops with local authority officers, researchers, community development workers and activists that took place during the summit, the final session brought all panellists and participants together to begin to flesh out what a social capital action plan for the North East might look like.

Participants identified ways that local, regional and national government can strengthen existing efforts to build social capital in the North East, whilst also making sure that resource and capacity is accessible to every neighbourhood in the region, particularly those where community activity is currently low. Recommendations were roughly arranged into two areas, based on which layer of government were most able to adapt and respond accordingly.

1. Local and regional government

A major theme of the Summit was the need to re-envision how local government relates to communities. Alison Mckenzie-Folan OBE, Chief Executive of Wigan Council, shared practical learning from the council's experience of transitioning to an approach that is more facilitative, building on the assets that already exists in neighbourhoods. She explained that "we didn't close libraries, leisure centres and instead opened family hubs even when we had £180million cut out of our budget" and that this had supported a new era of asset-based community development and community-led investment that nourished social capital and supported people to get involved in their communities.

Closer to home in Sunderland, Chief Executive of the City Council Patrick Melia echoed the need for local government to reorientate its role from a service provider for communities to a partner that works alongside and with them to address the issues that matter to local people. He stressed that rebuilding trust with communities requires "targeted and consistent action". Local government needs to show that it understands and trusts the autonomy, skills and experience of communities – not with words but material measures. Some of the practical measures that local government could take that were mentioned throughout the day include:

- Partnering with community groups, social enterprises and co-operatives to deliver the services that local communities need
- Choosing to procure goods from local community organisations, social enterprises and cooperatives

- Protecting social infrastructure (with minimum standards) and support communities to take back control of it through: designating assets as being of community value, giving communities a chance to buy them, and transferring buildings or land they own to community groups and organisations, helping to provide an anchor for community activity and a sustainable source of revenue to keep them going
- Directing national government funding to the neighbourhood level, particularly those neighbourhoods which are deprived and lack social infrastructure
- Supporting and fostering community level activity through small-scale grants, peppercorn rents for premises and the provision of technical support
- Quicker processes and reduced bureaucracy for communities who want to play an active role in their own regeneration and development

Regional government's role was regarded as different, because of its relative distance from the day to day of service delivery in communities. However, participants noted that regional government should play a "convening role in social capital practice and development". This was seen as particularly relevant for the incoming Pride in Place programme. Regional government might convene learning networks of local people, community practitioners, and organisations with technical expertise, for example, to support capacity-building and development in Pride in Place areas across the region to achieve their aims.

2. National government

The main recommendation for central government was for a consistent, targeted focus on neighbourhoods to support the delivery of its missions for office. Neighbourhoods were identified as “where real social capital is built” and whilst government “cannot mandate strength of connection from the centre it also doesn’t happen automatically: it requires power and resource to be devolved to local communities”. And just as many of the most deprived communities which suffer from a lack of social infrastructure have experienced historic disinvestment and decline, it will take long term, patient investment and support to support them to get back on their feet.

The Pride in Place programme is a good start - but participants stressed that to deliver it successfully, government needs to learn from previous neighbourhood programmes as well as what is already happening on the ground in the North East to harness the latent potential in communities. Baroness Armstrong underscored this point, explaining that policymakers need to “learn lessons from what went well before and what local authorities have been doing on the ground to get on and change things.” Four principles surfaced from discussions on potential successes and pitfalls identified from evidence and evaluation on a range of neighbourhood programmes from the lottery-funded Big Local programme to previous government schemes. Participants suggested that these should underpin the development and delivery of Pride in Place and include:

- Build trust and relationships in the target neighbourhoods. Many residents in the most disadvantaged areas have lost belief in the state after years of broken promises. Considered, patient work needs to be done in these communities to engage local people in meaningful, authentic ways ahead of the arrival of Pride in Place money.
- Go beyond listening – cede power. This should include building up the foundations of communities so that they can exercise their autonomy and collective efficacy to address the issues that matter to local people, rather than another “listening exercise” that leaves communities feeling powerless and daunted in the face of the challenges they are experiencing.
- Resident-led. Evidence shared by Professor Sarah Pearson on previous neighbourhood programmes showed that communities with higher levels of involvement across residents had better outcomes. The Neighbourhood Boards which will be set up to deliver Pride in Place in each area should reflect this, and be made up of a majority of residents (over 51%) who know their area and what it needs to improve better than any external expert or representative.
- Flexible and responsive capacity building. Time and funds need to be invested into building the capacity of local areas – that is, developing and strengthening the skills and confidence and people within these communities. The nature and type of capacity building should be tailored to each areas’ needs but might include everything from a support system for areas to tackle technical projects to more specific support for certain individuals or groups so that personal circumstances do not prevent anyone from getting involved.

What next

The North East Social Capital Summit was the first England-based gathering that brought people from local authorities, community organisations, businesses and grassroots local groups together to take stock of the current state of social capital and identify steps to fortify it in every part of the region. The Summit demonstrated that there is clear energy, motivation and drive for targeted action to rebuild and nourish social capital in the North East. The action plan initiated during the event will be taken on by 3ni and inform its work in supporting local authorities to drive meaningful change in the neighbourhoods that need it most.

Stay involved to take action and support social capital in the North East:

- Get involved in neighbourhood improvement and building the new movement for neighbourhoods: Join 3ni to have access to research, events, and activities that are designed to support local government and public sector partners to dissect learning on what works to build social capital in neighbourhoods – and, more importantly, put it into action.
- Become an Associate: Join the Insight North East Associates programme to be introduced to like-minded university and policy colleagues who share your commitment to using research to inform and shape policy.
- Think and act neighbourhood: Take a look through local noticeboards, facebook pages and whatsapp groups to identify what exists in your local neighbourhood – get involved in a group or activity that speaks to you, or if there isn't anything already happening, talk to your neighbours and kickstart something that will bring you and others together.

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SARAH
Canna Bred-King
Fall Circle Feed
Project

FALL CIRCLE
PROJECT

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 set up and incubated by Local Trust in 2024 and is now hosted by Capacity.

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