NEW LOCAL

WHERE PEOPLE MEET

How We Celebrate, Sustain and Reimagine Community Centres

written by:

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Supported by:

The Rayne Trust

“You can come and be the whole you. There’s no judgement, it’s very welcoming and inclusive – no matter who you are or where you’re from, you are invited in.”

“It feels like home. The connections that are around the centre, including with community members and other local organisations, all layer up to create a sense of this place being our home. It’s more than just the building.”

“This building is a community within a community – there’s so much going on from cradle to grave, all condensed in one place. You just walk in and you feel safe, you think ‘this is the place’.”

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We hope this report is a useful reflection of the learning shared throughout this process.

Any errors or omissions are our own.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The case for investing in community centres

Community centres have long stood as pillars of local life, as places where people can meet, mix and connect; where care, fun and friendships bloom and problems are shared. But we are losing these spaces at pace and at scale. The impact of this loss is tangible in our everyday lives. Areas where there are no places to meet face poorer social and economic outcomes, including higher rates of ill health and child poverty. Felt most strongly in our most economically deprived communities, this is compounding the challenges of entrenched disadvantage and regional inequality.[1]

But this is only part of the story. Against the odds, community centres remain woven into the fabric of place, improving people's quality of life in critical ways. From health and well-being to social connection and cohesion, to belonging and civic pride, the effects that ripple from a community centre are deep and far-reaching. For too long their value has been overlooked, their contribution pegged as a 'nice to have'. But this is beginning to change; there is growing recognition at both the local and national level of the need to restore the spaces that tie our communities together, to do so urgently and for the long term.[2]

1 Bell, R. and Plumb, N. (2021) Building our social infrastructure. The Cares Family. Available at: https://files.thecaresfamily.org.uk/thecaresfamily/images/Building-our-social-infrastructure-Final.pdf.

2 See for example MHCLG (2025) Plan for Neighbourhoods: prospectus. UK Government. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/plan-for-neighbourhoods-prospectus-and-tools/plan-for-neighbourhoods-prospectus.

The purpose of this report

This report spotlights community centres as a vital piece in the puzzle of assets within a place. It turns to the past, examining the origins of community centres. It focuses on the present and the distinct challenges and strengths that define the community centre of today. And it looks ahead, putting forward a vision for their future and the contribution they could make to the regeneration of our neighbourhoods and local areas. The work presented here should be of interest to everyone engaged in place-based work, particularly:

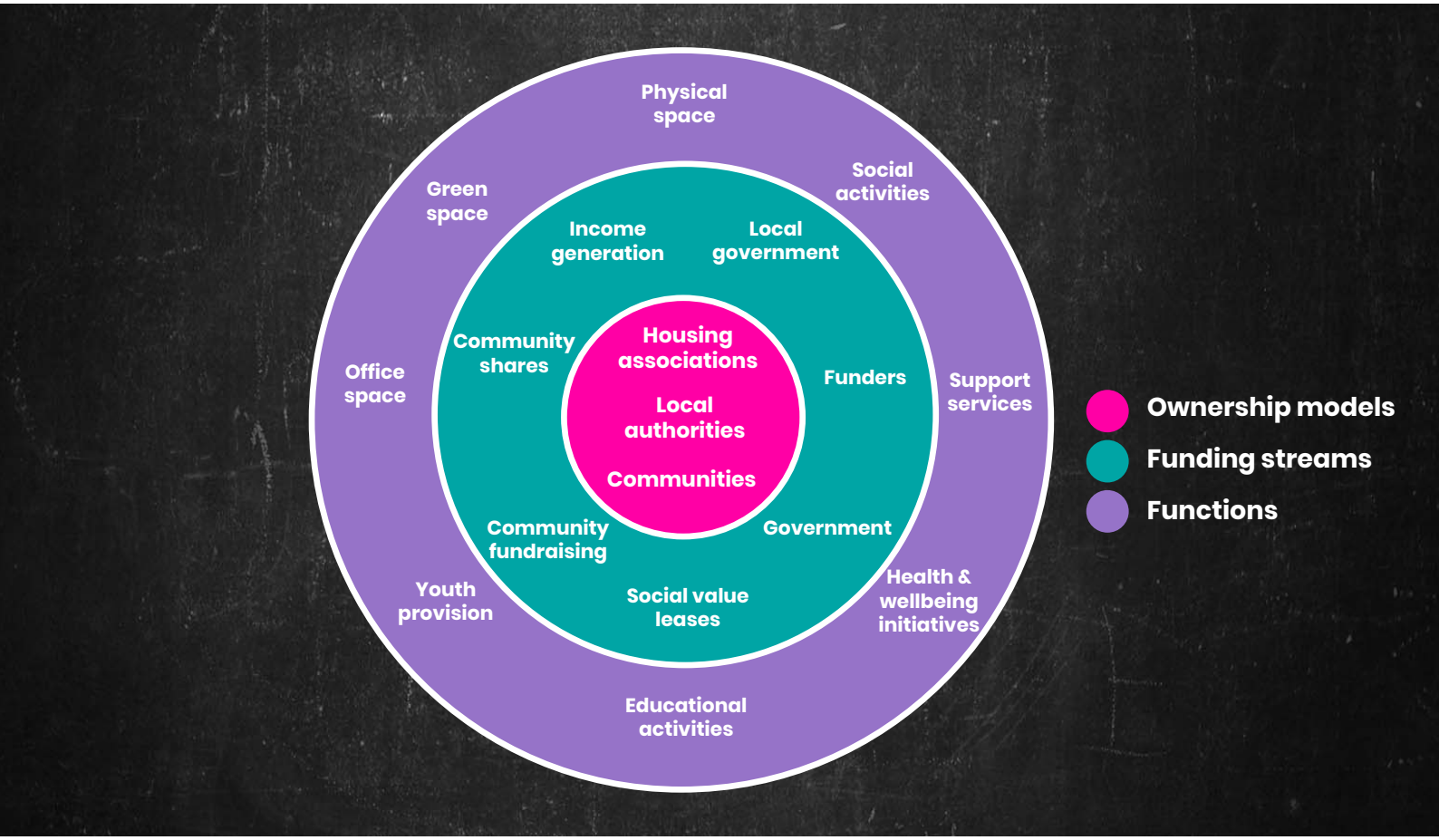
- **Community centres themselves**
- **Local government**
- **Housing associations**
- **Funders that support community assets**
- **Health partners**
- **National government**

Community centres today

Community centres occupy a special place at the heart of their neighbourhoods. Each one is unique to its place, the people it serves, and the geography it inhabits. In total, there are approximately 21,000 community centres and halls in Great Britain[3] hosting a wide range of activities, services, groups and events. How a community centre operates is shaped by its management and funding model. A combination of housing associations, local authorities and communities themselves take responsibility for the management of most community centres in the UK. The sector operates within a complex funding landscape, with a mix of funding streams underpinning the financial sustainability of each community centre, how it operates and the activities and services it offers. This is represented in Figure 1.

3 Ordnance Survey (2024) Points of Interest. Available at: https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/products/points-of-interest.

Figure 1: Community centre ownership models, funding streams and functions



The challenges to overcome

Community centres remain an important part of our social fabric, but their story today is a fragmented and precarious one. These vital community assets face six core challenges:

1. Existing funding options are often time consuming, difficult to access and rigid - and they risk entrenching inequalities
2. Buildings are costly and difficult to run and maintain, but access to the necessary support is limited
3. Perceptions about who a space is for create barriers to use that undermine the universal nature of community centres
4. The pressures facing community centre staff and volunteers have considerable personal and organisational consequences
5. Without a collective voice for the sector or access to bespoke support, community centres often operate in isolation
6. Current approaches to impact measurement fail to capture the true value of community centres

The strengths to build on

Despite the challenges faced, many community centres today play an active, strategic and essential role in the life of their place. Their strengths are manifold and multifarious – this report focuses on four of them.

Community centres are important local hubs for people to meet and connect to one another. Providing a spectrum of opportunities to engage and participate, community centres are spaces where meaningful relationships can be built, including between people from different classes, faiths, ethnicities and generations – driving social capital.[4] In doing so, community centres provide the scaffolding for community cohesion locally, are key partners in tackling the UK's loneliness problem and provide a natural home for civic engagement.[5]

Community centres support the health and wellbeing of communities. As trusted spaces with deep local roots, community centres help alleviate pressures on the health system, provide space for colocation and directly deliver health and wellbeing activities. Rather than medicalising the challenges people face in their everyday lives, community centres can offer holistic, relational support that addresses the underlying causes. This often takes the shape of inclusive and fun activities like cooking, socialising and dancing.[6]

Community centres have a unique and valuable role to play in the local ecosystem. Over time, community centres have built up trust within their communities by being non-judgmental and establishing genuine connections with people. This relational power provides the foundations for community-anchored collaboration and new approaches to place-based ways of working.

4 Claridge, T. (2018) Functions of social capital – bonding, bridging, linking. Social Capital Research. Available at: https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Functions-of-Social-Capital.pdf.

5 U.S. Surgeon General (2023) Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation. Available at: https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf; Kelsey, T. and Kenny, M. (2021) Townscapes 7: The Value of Social Infrastructure. Bennett Institute for Public Policy. Available at: https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/wp- content/uploads/2020/12/Townscapes_The_value_of_infrastructure.pdf.

6 Jones, M., Kimberlee, R., Deave, T. and Evans, S. (2013) The Role of Community Centre-based Arts, Leisure and Social Activities in Promoting Adult Well-being and Healthy Lifestyles. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health; 10(5):1948-1962. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph10051948.

Community centres are physical assets as well as social goods. Each of the previous strengths – and many more besides – are made possible by the space that a community centre operates out of. As a physical part of a community, community centres can reflect the cultural, social, natural and historical context of an area, providing access to a facility that is enjoyable to spend time in, that makes a place feel invested in and that people feel proud of and connected to.

The community centre of 2040

At the core of this research is a vision for what community centres could become if fully optimised: vibrant, inclusive hubs that are financially secure, environmentally sustainable and deeply embedded in local decision-making. This vision is grounded in the past and the present. It is inspired by workshops held with the Sutton Centre in Bradford, Trinity Rooms Community Hub in Stroud and Shenley Court Hall in Birmingham, where we worked alongside people closely connected with each centre to imagine what life might be like in 15 years' time and how their centre would respond.

> **"We are purposeful: we know why we're here; the difference we make; the people we serve; the community we're part of and the ecosystem that we operate in. We are here for, and think into, the long-term.**

The vision reinforces the community centre as a place of human connection; a source of local pride; offering something inherently preventative and universal; championing its community and, crucially, not a 'nice-to-have' but a core, dynamic, essential part of their place.

This vision is not intended to be a one-size-fits-all. What the future holds for a community centre will vary from place to place, depending on local assets, resources and priorities. It is, however, designed to influence the direction of travel and cement the position of community centres as places of first resort.

From vision to reality

For community centres to realise their full potential, they need to be recognised as a core part of the essential infrastructure of a place. Achieving this demands sustained investment, effort and focus at both the national and local level.

Community centres should be recognised as key strategic and delivery partners with deep knowledge of their communities

- National policymakers should recognise and support the role of community centres in local regeneration, particularly as part of the next wave of neighbourhood-focused initiatives such as the Plan for Neighbourhoods.

- Building on the English Devolution White Paper, national policymakers should recognise the role of the neighbourhood as a core unit for change in relation to thriving communities with community centres integrated into the English devolution agenda.

- Community centres should be factored in as vital social infrastructure within the government's plans for new towns, urban extensions and sustainable place making more broadly.

- The Department of Health and Social Care and the NHS should strategically signal the importance of community centres as part of the NHS 10-year plan and the ambitions to shift towards a neighbourhood health service.

- Local government should recognise and champion community centres as important partners in identifying and working to address key strategic local priorities.

National policymakers should develop a stronger understanding of community centres as a sector, the sector's collective needs and its impact

Progress towards this could be achieved through:

- A baseline state of the sector review to identify the number of community centres in the UK, the different ownership and management models and the number of staff and volunteers in the sector.

- Ensuring community centres are identified as a key civil society stakeholder across government and that this is reinforced in the forthcoming Civil Society Covenant.

New, long-term funding should be invested in community centres drawn from across the public, private and philanthropic sectors

- An independently administered, pooled fund should be created with resources drawn from a range of sources including funders; philanthropists; dormant assets and blended finance from the social investment sector. This would be for both current and future projects and should include revenue and capital support for at least 10-year funding cycles with funding for capacity building, networking and peer support as core components.

- Funding, including for maintenance of current centres and creation of new, high-quality centres, should be prioritised in areas that have received less funding and support in the past and would benefit most from increased social capital.

Partners working in place should identify their role in ensuring the financial sustainability of community centres

- Funders should provide core, multi-year funding allowing for consistency and security.

- Local authorities should continue to invest in community centres as part of their wider approach to prevention and see their role as stewards to all community centres in their locality, supporting them to understand and access funding opportunities that exist and ensure they are included in wider place-based funding bids.

- Housing associations should continue to support community centres in their care, understanding the important role they play in residents' and communities' lives and prioritise them within operational and strategic planning.

Communities should be better supported to take ownership of local assets

- Local authorities should ensure there is a Community Asset Transfer policy in place and consider how they can work as effective partners with communities through and beyond the transfer process to ensure new ownership is set up for long-term success.

- Funders should provide more support to local organisations and networks who are pioneering new approaches to community asset development.

- Government to commit to the plans laid out in the English Devolution White Paper to create a stronger pathway to community asset ownership by replacing the community 'Right to Bid' with a strengthened 'Right to Buy' Assets of Community Value and provide communities with access to the capital needed to take up this right through a Community Wealth Fund.

Attention should be paid to how to better capture the difference that community centres make – reframing the narrative around value

- All partners should continue to explore how to move away from a reliance on metrics to a more long-term, adaptable and holistic evaluation approach that understands community centres' universal and inherently preventative offer and the role they play as part of the ecosystem of their place.

Community centres are a core and enduring part of the UK's social infrastructure. There is a real opportunity to dismantle the challenges standing in their way – to recognise and nurture their true value as strategic allies with deep experience of their place. In doing so, their power as catalysts and stewards of health locally, as homes for human connection, sources of local pride and champions of their place can take root, helping to overcome some of the most pressing challenges affecting the health and happiness of our communities. The recommendations set out in this report would begin a shift that is long overdue – one that celebrates, sustains and reimagines community centres for the future.

INTRODUCTION

The case for investing in community centres

Communities thrive when people have spaces to gather, collaborate and share experiences. Spaces that foster a shared sense of belonging and nurture feelings of togetherness – which build the bonds that connect us to one another and to the places we live in. From community centres and libraries to residents' associations and youth clubs, the presence of community assets is a better predictor of life satisfaction than an area's GDP or average household income. Upgrading and maintaining them may be as significant for combatting local stagnation and decline as investing in new dual carriageways or electrified railways in those areas.[7]

However, community spaces are in decline, and have been for years. This deterioration is unravelling our social fabric, weakening the strength of community.[8] The consequences are deep and widespread. Areas where there are no places to meet experience poorer social and economic outcomes, including higher rates of ill health and child poverty[9] – a reality that is hitting the UK's most economically deprived communities the hardest.

7 Kelsey, T. and Kenny, M. (2021) Townscapes 7.

8 O'Shaughnessy, J., Tanner, W., Krasniqi, F. and Blagden, J. (2020) The State of Our Social Fabric. Onward. Available at: https://www.ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/The-State-of-our-Social-Fabric.pdf.

9 Local Trust (2019). Left behind? Understanding communities on the edge. Available at: https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/local_trust_ocsi_left_behind_research_august_2019.pdf.

In areas where community centres are lacking, their absence represents a key part of the story of decline.[10] But those that remain are an antidote to it. In neighbourhoods across the country, communities are gathering in spaces old and new, big and small. Built on a deep understanding of what makes their communities work, community centres are hubs of social connection, stewards of health and wellbeing, vital partners in their local ecosystems and important physical assets that communities can depend on.

At a time of record-low trust in democratic institutions,[11] when towns and cities are splintering through division, health inequalities are widening[12] and the climate crisis is intensifying, attention is turning to solutions that exist within our places. A new wave of neighbourhood initiatives is on the horizon. Local partners are shifting towards collaborative, place-based working. And there is growing recognition of the need to bring back spaces that tie our communities together.[13]

The purpose of this report

This report spotlights the valuable role that community centres play in local areas across the UK today. It sets out a vision for their future and the contribution they could make to the regeneration of our places. We define community centres as:

Multi-functional, inclusive, accessible and welcoming spaces that feel 'owned' by and are open to the whole community, offering wide-ranging activities and opportunities.

There are a rich range of community centres across the UK. This report provides a snapshot to better understand this sector. It explores the history of community centres, what community centres do today, and how they are owned, managed and funded. This is essential

10 O'Shaughnessy, J., Tanner, W., Krasniqi, F. and Blagden, J. (2020) The State of Our Social Fabric.
11 Curtice, J., Montagu, I. and Sivathasan, C. (2024) Damaged Politics? The impact of the 2019-24 Parliament on political trust and confidence. National Centre for Social Research. Available at: https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/british-social-attitudes-41-damaged-politics.
12 Goldblatt, P., Callaghan, O., Allen, J. and Porritt, F. (2024) England's Widening Health Gap. Institute of Health Equity. Available at: https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/englands-widening-health-gap-local-places-falling-behind/read-the-report.pdf.
13 MHCLG (2025) Plan for Neighbourhoods: prospectus. UK Government. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/plan-for-neighbourhoods-prospectus-and-tools/plan-for-neighbourhoods-prospectus.

context for anyone keen to work with and best support the sector, and for community centres to situate themselves within the broader landscape.

Community centres navigate a distinct set of challenges. Despite their crucial contribution to the fabric of place, they operate in a state of precariousness, with many unable to plan for the future. Funding challenges threaten their long-term viability and ability to maintain their physical assets. Real and perceived barriers to access undermine their universality and inclusivity. They are expected to prove their worth according to metrics that are not set up to recognise their value. And a lack of bespoke support leaves the people that keep community centres running under pressure and in isolation.

Despite these challenges, community centres are a vital asset – playing a distinct role in their own right and partnering with others to positively shape their community. The report explores four of the key ways in which community centres already have an impact in places and how this can be built on further. This includes their role as hubs of social connection, stewards of health and wellbeing, key actors within local ecosystems, and multi-purpose physical assets in the heart of communities.

Community centres are much-loved institutions which we need to protect and support to flourish into the future. This report puts forward a vision for the community centre of 2040 – building on the dynamic work of existing community centres and the challenges and opportunities they face. The vision is of vibrant, inclusive hubs that are financially secure, environmentally sustainable and deeply embedded in local decision-making.

Achieving this vision requires action to overcome the challenges community centres face and to build on the impact they already have. In the final sections of the report, we explore the enabling factors needed for this vision to become a reality and set out a series of recommendations to help key partners – including local authorities, housing associations, funders and national government – to consider their role in supporting this sector to thrive.

1. THE HISTORY OF COMMUNITY CENTRES

There is a rich and varied history behind the modern community centre, intertwined with social reform movements, philanthropic initiatives and government policies that aimed to improve the lives of people in both urban and rural communities. This chapter provides a short overview of this recent history as essential context to understand community centres today and to consider what the community centre of the future could look like.

Mid 19th Century

Miners' institutes and working men's clubs

Brought about by the industrialisation of the 19th century, miners' institutes and working men's clubs provided social and educational spaces in areas of heavy industry. Miners contributed a portion of their wages to a communal fund that paid for the construction and upkeep of institutes, often with support from coal owners and the Miners' Welfare Fund. By the 1940s there were more than a hundred miners' institutes, many of them in Wales. Most survived into the 1970s but the decline of coal mining brought many to an end.

Working men's clubs were run as cooperatives by and for working people, each with a democratically elected management committee. Intended as spaces for members to take part in political, educational or recreational activities, and to "make a real contribution to the communities in which they lived",[14] they became "an informal, community-owned pre-cursor to the Welfare State".[15] Most commonly found in the North of England, the Midlands, Scotland, Northern Ireland and South Wales Valleys, the popularity of working men's clubs reached its peak in the 1970s, when four million people, equivalent to around 10% of the UK adult population, were members of more than 4,000 clubs.[16]

Late 19th Century

Model villages

Amidst great demand for housing and industrial accommodation, model villages emerged in the 19th century. Designed to tackle severe housing, health and social problems, the villages were developed by philanthropic industrialists and social reformers including George Cadbury at Bourneville near Birmingham and Joseph Rowntree at New Earswick outside York.[17] Both Cadbury and Rowntree "encouraged residents to elect a village council, and to manage various local amenities, notably community centres", however community ownership was denied and control remained in the hands of the industrialists through their family-run charitable trusts.[18]

14 Club & Institute Union (nd) History of the CIU. Available at: https://ciu.org.uk/History.html.
15 Brown, P. (2023) Clubland: How the working men's club shaped Britain. Harper Collins.
16 Anderson, N. (2017) The rise and fall of the working men's club. The Irish Times. Available at: https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-working-men-s-club-1.3309420.
17 TCPA (2018) Understanding Garden Villages. Available at: https://tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/TCPA_Guide_-_Understanding_Garden_Villages_Jan_2018.pdf.
18 Wyler, S. (2009) A history of community asset ownership. Development Trusts Association. Available at: https://www.communityplanning.net/pub-film/pdf/AHistoryofCommunityAssetOwnershipsmall.pdf.

Settlement houses

In the late 19th century, settlement houses sprung up in response to poverty and social inequalities in rapidly growing urban areas. The houses were designed to be 'friendly and open' places that would bridge the gap between the rich and the poor, bringing them together both physically and socially within interdependent communities.[19] One of the earliest examples is Toynbee Hall, founded in 1884 in London's East End. Some of the people who spent time there, including Clement Attlee and William Beveridge, are responsible for some of the country's most radical social reforms.[20] After the First World War, two national bodies emerged to guide this movement: the Federation of Residential Settlements (now Locality), and the Educational Settlements Association.

Housing associations

The modern housing association movement was also born in the late 19th century, when charitable housing trusts were set up by Victorian philanthropists to help alleviate poverty and homelessness. Many of today's housing associations – such as Peabody, the Guinness Partnership and Octavia – were founded in this period.[21] Housing associations continued to form throughout the early 20th century, playing an important role in social housing alongside local councils. The 1974 Housing Act provided the housing association sector with

19 Hansan, J. (2023) The Settlement House Movement. Social Welfare History Project. Available at: https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/settlement-houses/settlement-houses/; Keller, P. (2022) Settlement Movement. University of Cambridge. Available at: https://newn.cam.ac.uk/feminist-radical-histories/settlement-movement.

20 Toynbee Hall (2023) Our history. Available at: https://www.toynbeehall.org.uk/about-us/our-history/.

21 National Housing Federation (nd) The history of housing associations. Available at: https://www.housing.org.uk/about-housing-associations/the-history-of-housing-associations/.

large-scale government funding and the number of associations grew significantly – by almost double that of the previous 25 years.[22] Alongside homes, housing associations provide community spaces where residents can access support and services. Today there are more than 1,300 housing associations in England that provide 2.9 million homes for more than six million people. Each one typically owns anything from one to more than 40 community spaces,[23] most commonly standalone buildings on or next to an estate.[24]

Village halls

To mark Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, the first village halls were opened in 1897.[25] Large numbers were subsequently set up after the First World War, when people needed a space to rebuild a sense of belonging and where they could participate in community life.[26] The multi-functional halls – some purpose-built and others repurposed – were created and managed by the very people they served, quickly becoming central to life in rural areas. Founded in 1919 to bring voluntary bodies together and strengthen their relationships with government, the National Council of Social Service (now the National Council of Voluntary Organisations), played an important role in their development, providing valuable guidance and support.[27]

22 Social Housing History (nd) The History of Social Housing. Available at: https://socialhousinghistory.stonewater.org/.

23 HACT (2024) Community benefits: A framework to capture the impact of community spaces. Available at: https://hact.org.uk/publications/community-benefits-research/.

24 Ibid.

25 Historic England (2022) A Brief History of Community Centres in England. Heritage Calling. Available at: https://heritagecalling.com/2022/12/08/a-brief-history-of-community-centres-in-england/.

26 Hazelton, J. (2021) 100 Years of Village Halls. Allied Westminster. Available at: https://www.villageguard.com/home/14396/100-years-of-village-halls.htm.

27 Metcalf, M. (2023) Things fall apart but the centres can hold. Big Issue North. Available at: https://www.bigissuenorth.com/news/2023/03/things-fall-apart-but-the-centres-can-hold/.

Early 20th Century

Backing from the Women's Institute (WI) also contributed to this growth. The WI movement emerged in Canada in 1897 before reaching the UK in 1915, with the initial aim to "revitalise rural communities and encourage women to become more involved in producing food during the First World War".[28] By 1927, almost 4,000 Women's Institutes had opened in village halls across the country, attracting 250,000 members who used and managed the spaces.[29]

Garden cities

Garden cities were an approach to urban planning which saw satellite communities built around city centres, separated by green space. Strong cultural and recreational facilities, including community centres, were a key principle of their design – the hope being to create vibrant, sociable neighbourhoods. First tested in Letchworth in the Hertfordshire countryside in 1903, the model has since taken root as far afield as Brazil and Japan.

Mid 20th Century

New towns

In 1946, faced with the need to rebuild Britain after the Second World War, the government embarked on a programme of town building. Most new towns were planned as a series of neighbourhoods, each with its own primary school, shops and community centre. Providing facilities for a range of community groups and activities, these centres often served as hubs for social interaction and community building in the newly developed areas. Second and third waves saw new towns extended to more parts of the country in the 1960s and '70s to alleviate housing shortfalls. In total, 32 new towns were created across the UK which are now home to around 2.8 million people.[30]

28 The Women's Institute (2019) History of the WI. Available at: https://www.thewi.org.uk/about-us/history-of-the-wi.

29 Smith, M. K. (2002) Community centres and associations. Infed. Available at: https://infed.org/mobi/community-centers-and-associations/.

30 Town and Country Planning Association (2014) New Towns and Garden Cities.

Housing estates

Not limited to new towns, housing estates also became home to community centres, inspired by models like Quarry Hill in Leeds, where a social centre was built containing a handicraft room and youth club facilities. Some iconic community centres emerged during this time, including on the Golden Lane estate – a pioneering Modernist council housing complex in the City of London.[31] Opened in 1957, the centre remains a focal point for the community, having undergone significant renovation in 2018 to modernise the space and make it more accessible. This period also saw communities working in partnership with local authorities to create communal spaces and facilities on their estates. In the Lye Valley ward of Oxford, for example, residents built the Bullingdon Community Centre with support from Oxford City Council, opening its doors in the early 1950s.[32]

The changing role of the state

The period between the Postwar Consensus and the rise of New Right economics marked a significant shift in the role of the state. During the 'years of consensus' that lasted from the late 1940s to the 1970s, there was a strong belief in a mixed economy, extensive welfare state and active state intervention to achieve economic stability and social equity.[33] The rise of New Right economics in the late 1970s and 1980s

31 City of London Corporation (2013) Golden Lane: Listed Building Management Guidelines. Available at: https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/assets/Services-Environment/golden-lane-listed-building-management-guidelines.pdf.

32 Bryant, R. (2022) The History of the Bullingdon Community Centre. The Bullingdon Community Centre. Available at: https://www.bullingdoncommunityassociation.co.uk/pages/the-history-of-the-community-centre.

33 Kavanagh, D. (2013) Thatcherism and the End of the Post-War Consensus. BBC. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/thatcherism_01.shtml.

emphasised free-market principles, deregulation, privatisation and a reduced role for the state – transferring responsibilities to the private sector and to individuals themselves.[34]

This ideological shift squeezed spending on public services such as health and education and led to cutbacks in the funding and autonomy of local authorities. This had knock-on effects for community centres: those with community or development workers frequently found them being replaced by administrators, and many had to look elsewhere for funding, with charitable donations, private sponsorship and community-led initiatives becoming increasingly important to sustain their operations. For some, it became difficult to cover core costs like cleaning, caretaking and repairs. As a result, opening hours were reduced and greater emphasis was placed on income-generating initiatives, such as wedding receptions and bars. Additionally, smaller-scale, paid-for activities were introduced to programming, creating financial barriers to access.[35]

Early pioneers of the modern community centre

Late 20th Century

In 1984 the Bromley-by-Bow Centre opened in London's East End, offering a broad range of activities and facilities, including a nursery, dance school, community cafe, art studios and workshops.[36] Rooted in the belief that social connection is central to meeting the needs of communities, the centre now delivers an extensive and integrated

34 Williams, B. (2021) The 'New Right' and its legacy for British conservatism. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *29*(1), 121–144. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2021.1979139.

35 Smith, M. K. (2002) Community centres and associations. Available at: https://infed.org/mobi/community-centers-and-associations.

36 Bromley-by-Bow Centre (2022) Our foundations and where we are going. Bromley-by-Bow Centre. Available at: https://www.bbbc.org.uk/about-us/our-history/.

range of programmes, and has built an international reputation for its innovative approach to community empowerment.[37]

National regeneration

The New Deal for Communities was a regeneration programme launched by the UK Government in 1998 that ran until 2011. Through an intensive, area-based approach it aimed to tackle deprivation in some of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in England, investing a total of £1.71 billion on around 6,900 projects and interventions over ten years.[38] Local regeneration schemes often prioritised community buildings and facilities, and by the end of the programme 320 new or improved facilities were being used by more than 84,000 people.[39]

Early 21st Century

The years of austerity

Introduced in 2010 after a period of significant market decline, austerity policies significantly reduced public spending. Over the last 15 years, this has placed local authorities under immense financial strain, with non-statutory services being scaled back or stopped altogether.[40] Council spending on community centres and public halls fell by 39%

37 Stocks-Rankin, C-R, Seale, B, and Mead, N (2018), Unleashing Healthy Communities: Researching the Bromley by Bow model. Bromley by Bow Centre. Available at: https://www.bbbc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/BBBC-UnleashingHealthyCommunities-FullReport-June2018.pdf.

38 Batty, E., Beatty, C., Foden, M., Lawless, P., Pearson, S. and Wilson, I. (2010) The New Deal for Communities Experience: A final assessment. UK Government. Available at: https://extra.shu.ac.uk/ndc/downloads/general/A%20final%20assessment.pdf.

39 Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (2015) New Deal for Communities national evaluation phase 2. UK Government. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7f220aed915d74e622896a/NDCevaluationphase2_0315.pdf.

40 Shaw, J. (2024) What's behind the black hole in local authority budgets and what can be done? UK in a Changing Europe. Available at: https://ukandeu.ac.uk/whats-behind-the-black-hole-in-local-authority-budgets-and-what-can-be-done/.

between 2010-11 and 2023-24.[41] Councils have also turned to asset sales to help pay for services. On average 6,000 council-owned properties and resources, including community centres, libraries and youth clubs, were sold off each year between 2010-2023, reaching a total of 75,000 assets worth around £15 billion.[42]

Community spaces in their distinct and varying guises have long been a touchstone of people's lives, providing support and sanctuary – a home from home. Taken together, they have served as hubs of social connection, education and recreation, strengthening the social fabric of communities. The moments in history outlined in this section, any many more besides, have left their mark on the community centre of today.

41 Goodier, M., Aguilar García, C. and Partington, R. (2024) How a decade of austerity has squeezed council budgets in England. The Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/jan/29/how-a-decade-of-austerity-has-squeezed-council-budgets-in-england.

42 Billingham, Z., Frost, S. Swift, R. and Webb, J. (2023) Parallel lives: Regionally rebalancing wealth, power and opportunity. IPPR. Available at: https://www.ippr.org/articles/parallel-lives.

2. COMMUNITY CENTRES TODAY

Born out of a rich and diverse history, community centres today run a wide variety of activities and services. They are housed in a range of buildings and have varied ownership and funding models. This chapter provides a snapshot of the modern community centre – important context for place-based partners and funders looking to understand how to better work with and support community centres.

Community centres are an important focal point in many local areas, playing a variety of roles in people's lives

Community centres occupy a special place at the heart of their neighbourhoods. Each one is unique to its place – its people and its location. In total, there are approximately 21,000 community centres and halls in Great Britain.[43,44] They come in all shapes and sizes, and this variety is part of what makes them special. Some are in heritage buildings; others are purpose built. Some are converted churches, schools, pubs, department stores and shipping containers, others are nestled among tree canopies. Some have one room, others have many. Some are single-storey; others are taller.[45] Some are owned by housing associations; others by local authorities, others by

43 Ordnance Survey (2024) Points of Interest.

44 In Northern Ireland there are over 160 council-owned community centres across the country's eleven local government districts, around 10% of which are managed by communities. These figures are drawn from publicly available data published on the websites of each of the eleven local authorities in Northern Ireland. This does not capture the number of centres owned and operated by community groups or other organisations in the districts.

45 See for example, the School Green Centre in Berkshire, Greyfriars Charteris Centre in Edinburgh, the Haven Community Hub in Essex, Mansell Street Community Centre in the City of London and the Tree House in Southwark.

communities themselves. Some have existed for generations; others are part of new housing estates. Despite being a vast and varied sector, there are a number of features and functions that are common to the modern community centre as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: The common features and functions of a community centre

Function	Features
Physical space	Accommodating a range of activities and events, including large halls for social and cultural events, meeting rooms for smaller gatherings catering to the needs of clubs, groups and classes, as well as cafes for affordable food and drink.
Social activities	Acting as hubs for social interaction and community building, centres provide opportunities for people to connect with their neighbours, build relationships and participate in shared activities.
Educational activities	Offering adult education classes, workshops and training programmes, supporting lifelong learning and skill development.
Support services	Hosting advice and counselling services, food banks and other initiatives that address local needs. This can be in partnership with statutory services.
Health and wellbeing initiatives	Programming activities and partnering with services that promote physical, mental and social wellbeing. This can include sports facilities such as gyms and multi-use games areas.
Youth provision	Catering specifically to the needs and aspirations of young people through targeted activities and services, including social, physical and learning-based activities like after-school/holiday clubs, play sessions, youth theatre and sports activities.
Co-working/ office space	Providing workspace for individuals and partner organisations that have aligned purpose and values.
Green space	Supplementing the physical building with green space in the form of community gardens and allotments, providing opportunities for people to connect with nature and take part in food growing and gardening.

The mixed management of community centres today speaks to their recent past, with a combination of housing associations, local authorities and communities themselves taking responsibility for their continued existence.

There are three main approaches to how community centres are managed – by housing associations, local authorities and communities. Each is explored in turn in this section, along with the emergent shift towards privately owned community spaces.

Housing associations

Housing associations are responsible for a broad range of community spaces – often serving specific housing developments.[46] According to a sector survey carried out by the Housing Associations' Charitable Trust (HACT) in 2024, 44% own and directly manage their spaces. Other approaches to management include leasing out spaces (8%), the introduction of peppercorn rents or social value leases (8%) and handing over spaces to be community-owned and run (5%). Almost one-third of respondents to the HACT 2024 survey reported that "when a partner leases a community space, they take responsibility for activities and staffing whilst the housing association covers repairs, utility bills, and governance associated with the freehold".[47]

The need for this type of collaboration emerged in our own research, with one focus group participant remarking:

"Things like health and safety and compliance, those responsibilities shouldn't fall on the community connectors who just want to do good in their community – if we want to get the best out of our residents, we shouldn't burden them."[48]

Although housing associations play an important role in owning, maintaining, and managing community centres, they may not fully appreciate the centres' strategic value. Less than half of HACT's survey

46 The National Housing Federation and CLES (2020) Housing associations as anchor institutions. CLES. Available at: https://cles.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Housing-associations-as-anchor-institutions-toolkit_final-2.pdf.

47 HACT (2024) Community benefits.

48 New Local focus group with housing associations, 10.12.2024.

respondents (45%) felt that their organisation understood how important community spaces are to residents, communities and businesses, while 21% felt their organisation viewed community spaces as being for resident use only or something that is outsourced and disconnected from their main business.[49] As a result, community centres often are not prioritised within operational or strategic planning, leaving them "under-resourced and red-taped."[50] That said, it is common for housing associations to provide small grants for communities to run activities at community centres. Other approaches that focus on longer-term impact are also emerging. For example, Clarion has adopted a capacity-building and funding model to support local voluntary and community sector organisations to become more sustainable.[51]

> **"Every community is different – the challenges they face and the skills they have. So, the approach has to be different. It's about being as adaptable as possible, which can be hard for housing associations because there's a desire to have everything standardised to fit in with our policies and procedures."**
> – Focus group participant, social housing provider

Delivering multi-agency hubs in East London

In London's East End, Poplar Housing and Regeneration Community Association (HARCA) collaborates across place to deliver multi-agency hubs. In its 14 community centres, residents can access activities and services including employment and training support, creative opportunities for young people, health improvement programmes and a food pantry that has supported over 350 families, 70% of whom have been referred to welfare benefit advice agencies for additional support.[52] For Poplar HARCA, community centres are central to its approach to community engagement and its long-term commitment to community health.[53]

49 HACT (2024) Community benefits.

50 Ibid.

51 Hathaway-Batt, S. (2024) Championing a housing-led capacity building and funding model to support grassroots VCSEs. Clarion Housing Group. Available at: https://www.clarionhg.com/news-and-media/2024/10/03/championing-a-housing-led-capacity-building-and-funding-model-to-support-grassroots-vcs-es.

52 Chartered Institute of Housing (2023) Building community presence. Chartered Institute of Housing. Available at: https://www.cih.org/media/uc2fmema/community-presence-v1.pdf.

53 Poplar HARCA (2024) Community Projects. Available at: https://www.poplarharca.co.uk/get-involved/community-centres/projects/.

Local authorities

Unlike community centres managed by housing associations that often serve residents of specific housing developments, local authority-owned centres are intended for a wider population. They do, however, share similar challenges in terms of building and maintaining internal buy-in for investing in these spaces. During our research, some local authorities raised that responsibility for community spaces often sat in estates teams where they were seen as "physical bricks and mortar assets".[54] Many community centres operate at a financial loss, costing councils more money than they take in,[55] but "from a social capital and social value perspective they are invaluable, so there is a conflict there".[56]

This conflict has become increasingly challenging to reconcile in light of the financial context that councils are now operating in. Strained resources have made it difficult to maintain ageing infrastructure and sustain or expand levels of service to communities, forcing many councils to rationalise their estates or adopt new approaches to asset management and ownership. In some cases, this has seen the role of the council shift from a direct provider of community space to an enabler, transferring publicly owned buildings into community ownership or management.

> **"Where community buildings thrive is where there's a sense of local ownership – not necessarily owning it but they're invested in it. Where it doesn't work is when people can use and rent the space, but it's closed when activities are not on. That model doesn't feel like it's a community asset, it's just a building."**
> – Focus group participant, local authority

54 New Local focus group with local authorities, 21.11.2024.

55 Trup, N., Carrington, D. and Wyler, S. (2019) Community hubs: Understanding survival and success. Local Trust and Power to Change. Available at: https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Community-Hubs-Report.pdf.

56 New Local focus group with local authorities, 21.11.2024

Communities

Community ownership of local spaces has become an increasingly common practice over the last decade. This has been supported by successive governments[57], and the public sector has developed policy and practice around the transfer of assets to communities – with pockets of real success and innovation. But transferring assets to communities remains a complex and time-consuming process with a good deal of variation in how it is approached and how successful it is.

Community asset ownership creates a different, community-driven pathway for local regeneration. [58] By acquiring and operating local spaces, communities can repurpose what exists in their area to better meet their needs and aspirations. Current levels of community ownership are not in line with demand; many community-led groups are being held back by a lack of available capital funding (see pages 35-42 for details), and they struggle to access adequate guidance or long-term capacity building.[59] To help combat this, new forms of support are emerging. This includes a growing network of community asset developers across the UK. Launched in 2023 and co-convened by Platform Places and Power to Change, the 'mycelial network' brings together organisations that are rooted in place, working to secure and steward community assets for the long term. The initiative is centred in peer learning and support and is advocating for sustainable funding, resilient partnerships and community-led decision-making.[60]

Community asset programmes to date have focused on community asset transfer (CAT) to pass buildings from the public sector to communities, or competitive funding pots. CAT has the potential to

57 The English Devolution White Paper sets out the UK Government's plan to create a stronger pathway to community asset ownership by replacing the community 'Right to Bid' with a strengthened 'Right to Buy' Assets of Community Value – a similar right to which already exists in Scotland under the Community Empowerment Act.

58 Theminimulle, S., Lee, N., Swann, P. Archer, T., Chan, J. and Meghjee, W. (2022) People shaping places, places shaping people. The Young Foundation. Institute for Community Studies. Available at: https://eprints.icstudies.org.uk/id/eprint/390/1/ICS%20PSP_PSP%20V2.5.pdf.

59 Gregory, M. (2024) Unleashing Community Ownership. The Co-operative Party. Available at: https://party.coop/wp-content/blogs.dir/5/files/2024/01/20240104-community-ownership-report-final-compress.pdf.

60 Platform Places (2023) Hawkwood: A gathering of community asset leaders and the birth of a new peer network. Available at: https://www.platformplaces.com/news/hawkwood-a-gathering-of-community-asset-leaders-and-the-birth-of-a-new-peer-network.

save important community spaces, unlock new funding opportunities and build community capacity and capabilities (see the Netherthird Community Centre case study on page 33). But the process itself is complicated and there is evidence that buildings transferred into community ownership can be liabilities rather than assets, being in poor condition and previously loss-making, and that local groups can struggle to manage the building in the longer term.[61] This reinforces the need for wraparound and sustained support, ensuring a handover of control that brings with it the necessary skills and resources.

> **"It's all very hard work... if any small group wants to secure a building from the council, there's the lease to be negotiated, and then there's the capital improvements, and there's running costs, and if you're taking over the insurance, I mean, it's no mean feat."** – Expert interviewee

The process of transferring assets to communities is guided by different policies across the UK and there is also a lot of variation in how extensively community asset transfer is used. For example, less than half of all councils in England have a Community Asset Transfer policy.[62] The geographical distribution of assets in community ownership is also hugely uneven.[63] These are often concentrated in more rural and less economically deprived areas. Wiltshire and Shropshire, for example, each contain more than 100 community-owned assets, whereas the most deprived 30% of local authorities in England contain 15 on average.[64] There are a number of factors that contribute to this reality: community ownership often requires significant pre-existing levels of social capital and community confidence, as well as financial resources within the community, and capacity to mobilise and organise around acquiring and managing local assets. Much of this is associated with having a strong civil society – something which is much more likely

61 Trup, N., Carrington, D. and Wyler, S. (2019) Community hubs.

62 Wallis, E., Roe, R. B. and Plumb, N. (2020) In Community Hands. Co-op and Locality. Available at: https://locality.org.uk/assets/images/COP33979_In-Community-Hands_2020.03.18.pdf.

63 Locality (2022) The Great British Sell Off. Locality. Available at: https://locality.org.uk/assets/images/The-Great-British-Sell-Off-FINAL-1.pdf.

64 Archer, T., Batty, E., Harris, C., Parks, S., Wilson, I., Aiken, M., Buckley, E., Moran, R. and Terry, V. (2019) Our assets, our future: the economics, outcomes and sustainability of assets in community ownership. Power to Change. Available at: https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Assets-Report-DIGITAL-1.pdf.

in less deprived areas.[65] Unless this uneven picture is addressed, it risks reinforcing regional inequalities, putting communities with more resources in a better position to take on spaces, while those with fewer resources will see vital spaces close – becoming "passive observers of decline".[66]

> **"In the past 20 years or so, community asset transfers from local authorities have often been these difficult historic buildings that they no longer require or can't afford to take care of, or they have become surplus to their requirements. And these are buildings that we see huge demand from communities to take on because they are important to that particular place."** – Expert interviewee

Transferring ownership to the community in East Ayrshire

A former mining village in East Ayrshire, Netherthird is a close knit and vibrant community. At the heart of the village is Netherthird Community Centre which the community took over from the council in 2016. Before taking on the building, local people came together to form the Netherthird Initiative for Community Empowerment (NICE), with council support to set up a steering group. For NICE, signing the 25-year lease was daunting at first, but taking on the centre has been a huge success.

65 All-Party Parliamentary Group for 'left behind' neighbourhoods (2021) Session 7 briefing: taking ownership, taking control? Available at: https://www.appg-leftbehindneighbourhoods.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Session-7-Community-Assets-briefing_.pdf.

66 Centre for Social Justice (2024) Lonely Nation: How to tackle loneliness through the built environment. Available at: https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/CSJ-Lonely_Nation_3.pdf.

"To tell the truth, I wanted to hand it back at least three times... I was scared of the financial side – how are we going to get the money to run this?" - Maggie Campbell, Chair, Netherthird Community Centre

The centre has become a vibrant hub for community life, offering a community food larder, coffee mornings and keep fit classes. It hosts a karate club, mother and toddler group, senior citizen's group, an art club and bagpipe lessons. It's home to a community café, a charity shop and a community garden.[67] These are all services developed by and for the community, responding to locally identified needs. To keep up with growing demand, NICE built an extension with two mental health treatment rooms and a larger main hall.

This led them to pursue ownership of the original part of the building. In 2021, NICE approached the council with a proposal to purchase the property, which was met with approval. By 2023, it had successfully secured over £110,000 in funding from the Scottish Land Fund and the purchase completed one year later. The centre continues to work in partnership with the council, including with its Vibrant Communities Service to run a food bank and community larder, and with the Supported Employment Team to help young people overcome barriers to work.

Before the community took on the centre, it was managed by caretakers and open for limited hours.[68] Now, says Maggie Campbell, the centre's Chair, "It's by the community for the community and everybody feels welcome. It's just a different place all together – it's buzzing."

67 Netherthird Community Centre (2024) About Us. Available at: https://netherthirdcentre.co.uk/about-us/.

68 Case study developed from interview.

The role of the private sector in providing social infrastructure

A new approach to the ownership and management of community space is on the rise. Privately owned spaces – from board game cafés and soft play centres to gyms and coworking hubs – are taking on some of the roles historically filled by community centres.[69] These spaces provide a place for people to gather, but this is not their primary function. This can mean that their offer is shaped by market demand rather than community need and that access can be limited by a person's ability to pay. However, it also presents an opportunity. Research by Power to Change and the Bennett Institute for Public Policy found that an increasing number of private asset owners "believe that there is a considerable economic, as well as social, value in creating or maintaining good-quality social infrastructure, and many are keen to establish mutually beneficial partnerships with communities and local authorities to deliver it."[70]

Today community centres rely on a complex mix of funding streams, with a great deal of diversity in how each one is funded

The funding landscape for community centres is complex, with a mix of funding playing a big role in their financial sustainability, how they operate and the activities and services they offer. There are seven key sources of funding that community centres access - Table 2 summarises each of these, along with their key benefits and challenges. This is then explored in more detail in the section below.

69 Gregory, D. (2024) New Social Spaces. Stir to Action. Available at: https://www.stirtoaction.com/articles/new-social-spaces.

70 Marks, R., Craig, J. and Garling, O. (2024) (2024). Private space, public good: working together to deliver social infrastructure. Bennett Institute for Public Policy and Power to Change. Available at: https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Private-space-public-good-report_2024.pdf.

Table 2: Summary of funding sources

Type	Main approach	Key benefits	Key challenges
Local government	Managing community centres in-house and providing grants for services and activities.	Covers core operational costs as well as programming.	Impacted by government funding cuts and policy changes.
Funders (independent trusts and foundations, philanthropists, public funders)	Grants of various sizes and purposes shaped by the strategic priorities of the funder.	Available for a diversity of purposes including for buildings and equipment, organisational development, specific activities/services or unrestricted use.	Can be short-term, inconsistent and difficult to apply for.
Government	Broad range of funds delivered by the UK Government and devolved administrations, providing multi-year project funding and grants at different scales.	Possible to secure multiple grants at once for different projects and can demonstrate credibility to strengthen applications elsewhere.	Can be prescriptive, with pre-determined targets, timescales and reporting deadlines, impacting staff capacity. Application processes are typically complex and highly competitive.
Income generation	Commercial functions and income-generating activities, including room hire, on-site cafés and paid-for activities.	Source of unrestricted funding and can support cross-subsidy.	Has to be carefully balanced to protect universal social function of community centres, and profitability is impacted by the local context.
Community fundraising	Community members donate through a range of means, including events and activities.	Helps meet funding targets while bringing in additional non-financial resources, reaching new audiences and raising the centre's profile.	Amounts raised tend to be relatively small and managing the fundraiser can take a significant amount of effort and time.
Community shares	Withdrawable, non-transferable share capital that enables community members, businesses and others to become shareholders in a co-operative or community benefit society.	Can help increase local ownership and provides a flexible alternative for projects that struggle to secure funding from other sources.	Relatively new and can be complex, impacting uptake. Success hinges on community buy-in and ability to invest.
Social value leases	Subsidised rent provided on the condition of community benefits.	Can reduce the pressure community centres are under and free up much needed funds.	Qualifying criteria has to be met and performance against the terms of any agreement must be quantified.

Local government

The difficult financial picture facing local authorities has led to the closure and withdrawal of funding for a significant proportion of community centres. Notwithstanding, local authorities remain a core pillar of support for community centres, funding them in two main ways: either by managing them in-house and/or by providing grants for specific activities. Some councils are also introducing new funding approaches. In 2022, for example, the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham transferred council developer fees to the UK's first community-led investment fund, BD Giving. Through its Spaces + Places programme, residents are deciding how to invest £1 million in community spaces across the borough.[71]

> **"The last 15 years have made running these spaces even harder than before, the budgets available for community space in revenue terms or in capital terms at the local level has been really, really limited if there is money there at all."**
> – Expert interviewee

Funders

Independent trusts, foundations and others, like the National Lottery Community Fund, offer an important and alternative source of funding and make significant investment in the sector. This includes everything from small, place-based grant makers who have strong relationships in the geographical areas they fund to large, UK-wide funders who distribute millions of pounds each year to a diverse range of organisations across a number of themes.

Although an important and relied-upon source of income, applying to funders can be competitive, restrictive and time-consuming. This has been exacerbated by the reduction of funding from statutory sources and further complicated by non-statutory funders now supporting areas of work that once would have been seen as the purview of the state. This puts additional pressure on available budgets and can result in funders having to close programmes due to being overwhelmed with applications.

71 Barking and Dagenham Giving (2025) Thinking Big About Community Spaces in Barking and Dagenham. Available at: https://bdgiving.org.uk/updates/thinking-big-about-community-spaces-in-barking-and-dagenham/.

> **It is really, really hard to just sit in at night constantly doing funding applications - you don't know the buzzwords."**
>
> – Expert interviewee

Some funders support the core costs of community centres, providing funding on a multi-year basis; three years remains the norm with a limited number of funders extending to a five-to-10-year funding period.[72] Others fund specific activities or groups of people who attend the centre. Certain funders focus more on catalysing innovation, supporting organisations who are exploring different models and ways of doing.

> **Whether it's grant funding or contract funding, it's very hard to look more than two-to-three years ahead. Consistency is a problem, which impacts on staff knowing what their future is."**
>
> – Community centre workshop participant

Central government and devolved administrations

There are existing and emerging opportunities for community centres to access government funding. For example, the UK Government has accepted calls for a Community Wealth Fund, committing £87.5 million from the Dormant Assets Scheme over four years (2024-2028). This will support "the development of services and facilities that meet the needs and reflect the aspirations of residents" in some of England's most economically deprived places.[73] In Wales, the Communities Facilities Programme provides community and voluntary sector organisations with grants to purchase and/or invest in physical improvements to community facilities.[74] In Northern Ireland, voluntary and community sector groups can access project funding and small grants through the Central Good Relations Fund.[75]

72 For example, City Bridge Foundation has committed to providing long-term core funding by default as part of a new 10-year strategy. See Legraien, L. (2025) Major foundation to offer core funding by default as part of 10-year strategy. Civil Society. Available at: https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/major-foundation-to-offer-core-funding-by-default-as-part-of-10-year-strategy.html.

73 Local Trust (2024) What is a Community Wealth Fund? Local Trust. Available at: https://localtrust.org.uk/policy/what-is-a-community-wealth-fund/.

74 Welsh Government (2024) Community Facilities Programme. Available at: https://www.gov.wales/community-facilities-programme.

75 Northern Ireland Executive (2025) Central Good Relations Fund. Available at: https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/articles/central-good-relations-fund.

However, national funding programmes delivered by different government departments can overlap, meaning objectives are repeated across multiple programmes in the same area. For local areas, this can mean that "a complex web of centralised funding pots and programmes often doesn't align with their needs or timescales", making them less effective.[76] To overcome this, the Scottish Government introduced the Place Based Investment Programme – a five-year, £325 million capital fund that aligns all place-based funding initiatives in Scotland to create a coherent approach to building resilient communities, addressing inequalities and supporting an inclusive, well-being economy in local settings.[77]

Income generation

Many community centres offer income-generating activities as a significant source of unrestricted funding, which can be used to cross-subsidise other activities and services. This includes room hire, on-site cafés and paid-for activities. For example, Fitzherbert Community Hub in Brighton runs the Fitz Café – a community café serving barista coffee and pastries, while Leith Community Centre in Edinburgh rents out rooms to people and businesses in the local area. As one of our research participants noted, these activities have to be carefully balanced with the social function that sits at the heart of a community centre so that it does not "lose the distinct nature of the place as a welcoming space for all, because if you get that wrong, suddenly people that have used the space will feel like it's not for them anymore."[78]

A number of them are really clearly trying to create social opportunities which are open to everybody - you don't feel left out because you're struggling financially, it's an affordable, normal life, if you like, and I think mentally and emotionally that's pretty important." – Expert interviewee

76 Greener, B. (2024) Joining-up Whitehall with local places. Public Policy Design. Available at: https://publicpolicydesign.blog.gov.uk/2024/02/15/joining-up-whitehall-with-local-places/.
77 Our Place (2024) Place Based Investment & Infrastructure. Scottish Government. Available at: https://www.ourplace.scot/about-place/themes/place-based-investment/place-based-investment-infrastructure.
78 Expert interview, November 2024.

Community fundraising

The tradition of community fundraising remains a source of support for community centres, but it is difficult to achieve at scale. Community fundraising can take many forms, from tried-and-tested bake sales to sponsored bike rides to online fundraisers, providing an unrestricted source of funding. As well as helping community centres reach fundraising targets, this approach can bring in additional non-financial resources, including the skills, time and expertise of people locally, while helping to raise the centre's profile.[79] Community fundraising is particularly helpful for projects that struggle to get support from conventional funding sources and it can be used as proof of concept when seeking larger funds from more traditional funders to scale-up or sustain a project.[80] However, the amounts raised tend to be relatively small, shaped in large part by the money available within the local community and the networks of those involved.[81] Whilst community fundraising has value beyond money, raising significant amounts is unlikely and to do so could take years.

Community shares

Communities are investing in community shares to save important spaces and run them in ways that work for them. Community shares are withdrawable and non-transferable – a form of equity uniquely available to co-operative and community benefit societies. Through a one member, one vote system, each stakeholder has an equal say in how the building that they have invested in is run, boosting local ownership and promoting inclusive governance.[82] The model provides a flexible alternative for projects that would otherwise struggle to secure

79 Clear Impact Consulting (2023) Community Business Crowdmatch Evaluation. Power to Change. Available at: https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/87-PTC-Community-Business-Crowdmatch-evaluation_V2.pdf.

80 Bone, J. and Baeck, P. (2016) Crowdfunding good causes: Opportunities and challenges for charities, community groups and social entrepreneurs. Nesta and NCVO. Available at: https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/crowdfunding_good_causes-2016.pdf.

81 Greater London Authority (2020) Connective Social Infrastructure: How London's Social Spaces and Networks Help Us Live Well Together. Available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/connective_social_infrastructure_0_0.pdf.

82 Bone, J., Baeck, P., Cretu, C. and Old, R. (2021) Crowdfund London: Five years of empowering communities through civic crowdfunding. Greater London Authority. Available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/crowdfund_london_report_web.pdf.

funding, either because they do not have the track record necessary for bank loans or they have been unsuccessful in securing investment from grant funders.

For example, the historic community hub in Manchester, Stretford Public Hall, raised £94,000 for urgent roof repairs and energy efficiency adaptations through its community share offer.[83] The community shares market is growing.[84] However, challenges remain, with the approach "often seen as too complicated by people who run community projects, which has been a barrier to its wider uptake".[85]

Social value leases

Used by housing associations, local authorities and some private sector companies, social value leases can be a real benefit to community centres[86] - providing community groups with access to subsidised rents on the condition that they provide benefits to the local community, such as offering employment support to people in thee area.[87] There are a number of qualifying criteria that organisations have to meet to be eligible for a subsidy and their performance against the terms of any agreement has to be quantified, typically through a combination of self-reporting, data collection and independent verification processes.[88] This can place an additional burden on stretched teams already demonstrating a range of outputs and outcomes to meet the expectations of funders.

83 Stretford Public Hall (2024) Keep Stretford Thriving! Available at: https://stretfordpublichall.org.uk/invest/.

84 Fazal, M. (2024) Community shares are crucial to a future economy that works for all. Power to Change. Available at: https://www.powertochange.org.uk/evidence-and-ideas/news-and-events/community-shares-are-crucial-to-a-future-economy-that-works-for-all/.

85 Old, R., Bone, J., Boyle, D. and Baeck, P. (2019) Taking Ownership: Community empowerment through crowdfunded investment. Nesta. Available at: https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Taking_ownership_v4.pdf.

86 The London Sustainable Development Commission (2022) Social Value Playbook. Greater London Authority. Available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/lsdc_social_value_playbook_final.pdf.

87 Greater London Authority (2020) Connective Social Infrastructure.

88 Property X-Change (2022) What is a social value lease? Property X-Change. Available at: https://propertyxchange.london/discover/what-is-a-social-value-lease/.

An approach to social value leases in Newham

In 2019, the London Borough of Newham introduced a Social Value Policy for council-owned community centres to support its wider Community Wealth Building ambitions. Within the policy, community centres are said to deliver 'social value' where they are well maintained; open when people want to use them, welcoming to everyone and well-used by the community; offer quality employment and/or volunteering opportunities; promote environmental sustainability and deliver community activities, including those that combat social isolation, improve health and wellbeing and encourage social integration.[89] Following engagement with the local voluntary and community sector, the council devised a social value matrix for community centres that attaches a number of measures to each of these five strands. Organisations can receive a social value subsidy of 25-80% based on their respective score.

Social investment

A related but currently uncommon source of funding for community centres, social investment has a 'blended motivation' of financial and social return.[90] Through this type of investment, charities, community organisations and social enterprises can access repayable finance – sometimes blended with grant funding which does not expect a return – to cover anything from furniture and equipment to building renovations and purchases.[91] While this can be a suitable and useful source of funding, particularly for those who struggle to access it from other sources, it can also indebt the recipient with repayments – often with higher interest rates than traditional banks. In practice, community centres and community assets more broadly struggle to access social investment, particularly those in the most economically deprived communities,[92] and therefore it is not currently a key source of funding.

89 Newham Council (2019) Social Value Policy: Community Centres. Newham Council. Available at: https://www.newham.gov.uk/downloads/file/4038/social-value-policy-and-proceedures.

90 Gregory, D. (2021) Levelling the land: Social investment and 'left behind' places. Local Trust. Available at: https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Levelling-the-land_November-2021.pdf.

91 Local Trust (2015) Guide to social investment for Big Local. Available at: https://www.localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/local_trust_guide_to_social_investment_july_2015-1.pdf.

92 Commission on Social Investment (2022) Reclaiming the Future. Available at: https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/app/uploads/2022/07/Reclaiming-the-Future-Commission-on-Social-Investment-Report.pdf.

THE CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

Community centres remain an important part of our social fabric, but their story today is a fragmented and precarious one. These vital community assets face six core challenges: financial sustainability; maintaining their physical assets; ensuring inclusivity; supporting staff and volunteers; accessing collective and bespoke support; and demonstrating impact. This section explores each of these challenges and how they impact those that work in and support community centres.

Existing funding options are often time consuming, difficult to access and rigid - and they risk entrenching inequalities

While diverse income streams offer flexibility, they come with uncertainty, with many funding sources being short-term, competitive or restricted in use. Some funders prefer to back new and innovative projects that promise visible impact or align with specific strategic goals. Securing long-term, flexible funding remains difficult, often trapping community centres in a cycle of short-term survival, without the ability to think strategically into the long-term. This affects all community centres but particularly those in economically deprived areas.

Funding also falls unevenly across the UK. Research by OCSI shows that charitable grant funding is lower in 'left behind' neighbourhoods – those which face the "dual disadvantage of high levels of deprivation and socio-economic challenges" and which lack "the community

and civic assets, infrastructure and investment required to mitigate these challenges".[93] According to Local Trust, this is a sign of "just how important it is to have local organisations and individuals around who can fill in the application forms, work shoulder-to-shoulder with residents to demonstrate their neighbourhoods' needs, and implement plans that spark genuine and sustained change."[94]

Alternative funding sources, like community fundraising and income generation, are less viable in economically deprived areas. At the Netherthird Community Centre in East Ayrshire, "the community café brings people together... It serves low-priced food because you couldn't have expensive food in our community - people just haven't got the money. It's a good source of income, but it wouldn't be financially sustainable." In Wales sharp regional differences affect the viability of different funding models, with one research participant commenting: "The [Welsh] valleys are relatively sparsely populated, post-industrial areas with very low levels of disposable income, there isn't a local population who in a sense can sustain the market and that makes social enterprise much more difficult."[95] Community centres in economically deprived areas therefore need specific support to identify sustainable sources of funding.

> **"Lots of organisations do some really great work on income generation. But income generation in Blackpool is different to what it is in Highbury and Islington, or wherever it might be... I think policy and the funding availability in different places needs to reflect those facts."** – Expert interviewee

Buildings are costly and difficult to run and maintain, but access to the necessary support is limited

Running a building safely and successfully takes technical expertise. For community-owned community centres especially, this specific kind of knowledge can be very hard to source externally and places additional

93 OCSI (2019) Left behind? Understanding communities on the edge. OCSI. Available at: https://ocsi.uk/2019/09/05/left-behind-understanding-communities-on-the-edge/.

94 Bolton, M. and Dessent, M. (2024) Focusing on doubly-disadvantaged neighbourhoods. JRF. Available at: https://www.jrf.org.uk/neighbourhoods-and-communities/focusing-on-doubly-disadvantaged-neighbourhoods.

95 Expert interview, November 2024.

pressures on those running the building. At the same time, community centres struggle to secure funding for building maintenance and upkeep. Neglecting the physical condition of a space can lead to it becoming unappealing or unsafe, particularly if small issues are left to turn into big structural problems. When this happens, it can become increasingly difficult to attract external investment, partnerships and other income generating opportunities, and risks turning a valuable community asset into a liability.

> **"Who is paying for the lights? Who is paying for insurance? Core costs aren't glamorous for funders and that's a big gap for us."**
> – Community centre workshop participant

There are some examples of funding programmes targeted at building repairs and refurbishments. For example, the National Lottery Community Fund awarded £565 million between 2016-2021 to renovate 10,000 community buildings.[96] Northern Ireland's (2017) Community Halls Pilot Programme provided £1.9 million in capital assistance to 90 community halls[97]; and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund has provided community centres with small grants to improve their buildings. However, consistent funding for this type of work is not commonplace, with funding often made available on a one-off basis and on a small scale.

> **"It needs a new roof, it needs new toilets and so forth. We managed to get some funding for a new kitchen but we're talking about quite small amounts of money, £6,000 and so on, which will be fantastic, but really the fabric of some of the centres is hard work."**
> – Expert interviewee

The financial constraints facing councils have made it increasingly challenging for them to invest in upgrading their community buildings. Housing associations also struggle to prioritise maintenance, with one participant in our focus group with social housing providers

96 Iqbal, T. and Hall, A. (2021) Connections make communities. National Lottery Community Fund. Available at: https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/insights/connections-make-communities-our-role-in-local-infrastructure-funding.

97 Northern Ireland Executive (2017) Givan announces £1.9 million for community halls. Available at: https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/givan-announces-ps19-million-community-halls; The pilot received 850 applications, which may indicate the scale of the challenge and the gap that remains.

commenting: "There has been a lack of investment in the buildings. Our residents are our priorities, so we make sure that they are safe and we do the compliance checks, but the buildings are tired… You get blind [to the building's appearance] as an officer when you walk up to a centre. I'm trying to take a step back and realise that they need curb appeal." To remedy this, HACT is calling for formalised maintenance procedures for community buildings "so these spaces are treated differently from general housing stock by estates and repairs teams and asset management teams."[98]

> **"We used to have an old wooden community centre and it had razor wire right round the roof to stop the kids climbing on it. People used to say to me, 'this is a terrible looking place', and the kids ended up burning it down. When the council built a beautiful new community centre, it just lifted the place up and since then, we haven't really had any antisocial behaviour because I think people take pride in the place – they have started taking care of it and hanging baskets outside of it, instead of just letting everything go to rack and ruin."** – Expert interviewee

Perceptions about who a space is for create barriers to use that undermine the universal nature of community centres

A core strength of a community centre's offer is that it is universal, open to everyone. However, there are a lot of factors that influence a person's decision to go into a community centre – whether for a cup of tea or to sign up for an event. Some of these are beyond the centre's control, including the availability of local transport links. Others are more directly affected by the centre itself – including local perceptions of who that place is for, which can result in fears, anxieties or concerns about taking a step inside.[99] This is associated with a range of cues, such as who else is there and what the décor is like.[100]

98 HACT (2024) Community benefits.

99 Greater London Authority (2020) Connective Social Infrastructure.

100 British Academy and Power to Change (2023) Space for Community: Strengthening our Social Infrastructure. Available at: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/4536/Space_for_community_strengthening_our_social_infrastructure_vSUYmgW.pdf; Greater London Authority (2020) Connective Social Infrastructure.

In this sense, community centres can entrench local divides if they appeal only to certain segments of the community, or if only certain people feel welcome. Research commissioned by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) found that, "Despite the social benefits of community centres, focus group participants felt they were often focused on support for specific groups or offered specific classes and did not provide a space just to socialise".[101] This threatens the universality and inclusivity that should sit at the heart of any community centre and is compounded by current approaches to funding that often target specific demographics or types of activity, rather than providing more expansive support to the centre as whole.

> **"There's a risk that if you've got a community centre that's already being used by a certain number of groups, but some communities aren't using it, that they may not feel it's theirs".**
> – Expert interviewee

The pressures facing community centre staff and volunteers have considerable personal and organisational consequences

Staff – paid and unpaid – are at the heart of a community centre. Through their knowledge and understanding of the community, they build spaces that are relevant and responsive to its needs and are "a crucial source of the value that community provision can yield… closely associated in the minds of users with the activity or service that is provided".[102]

> **Physical spaces are really important… but equally important are those people that work in those spaces to activate them… you can't just drop a community centre into a community and say it's going to make a difference. There needs to be something that brings it to life for people. And that's kind of the human bit of it."**
> – Expert interviewee

101 National Centre for Social Research and RSM UK Consulting (2025) Research about connecting with others via the local physical and social environment. DCMS. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-about-connecting-with-others-via-the-local-physical-and-social-environment/research-about-connecting-with-others-via-the-local-physical-and-social-environment.

102 Kelsey, T. and Kenny, M. (2021) Townscapes 7.

The ways in which community centre staff create non-judgemental, welcoming spaces take time, skill and intention, but their role is under-recognised. Staff members, particularly at community-owned centres, often juggle multiple responsibilities, from managing day-to-day operations to applying for grant funding to handling technical or legal processes. There is often little time for strategic thinking with the work demanding a reactive approach which can lead to burnout as well as a lack of opportunity to think about the long-term, including succession planning. Coupled with low pay and short-term contracts, these experiences act as barriers to sustaining a consistent and supported team.

Many community centres rely on volunteers, but it can be challenging to recruit people with the necessary time and skills. While some community centres have been successful in attracting volunteers with specialist skills to plug gaps, this is not always the case. Roles that are more time intensive or where consistency is required tend to attract fewer individuals, [103] meaning centres often have high numbers of volunteers, each giving a bit of time to support planning, delivery and operations. While this is vital, it takes a lot of effort and time to onboard and support volunteers, especially when staff have support needs themselves.[104]

> **"Where the volunteers in our local centres have emerged is local people wanting to do something for themselves. It's not, what can we do for these poor people? It's very much a sense of pride in the place and in their community."** – Expert interviewee

Without a collective voice for the sector or access to bespoke support, community centres often operate in isolation

There is no national infrastructure body or support network specifically for community centres. The infrastructure bodies that exist to support local organisations and groups to run a wider range of community

103 Frontier Economics, Kaleidoscope Health and Care and Rand Europe (2020) Health and Social Care Innovation, Research and Collaboration in Response to COVID-19. Frontier Economics. Available at: https://www.frontier-economics.com/uk/en/news-and-insights/news/news-article-i8252-health-and-social-care-innovation-research-and-collaboration-in-response-to-covid-19/.

104 Practical Governance (2019) Protecting Community Assets: Inquiry. Available at: https://www.protecting-community-assets.org.uk/Full_Interim_Report.pdf.

initiatives have "suffered from the government funding cuts of the last 15 years or so," making it increasingly difficult to sustain the "flow of advice" that staff and volunteers rely on in areas such as applying for funding, developing sustainable business models, day-to-day operations and refurbishing buildings.[105] This is making it harder for individual centres to navigate challenges and means staff often operate in isolation with little access to shared resources, technical support or professional development opportunities.

There are positive examples of where targeted training and guidance have been provided. Volunteers effecting change in their community can take part in Local Trust's Community Leadership Academy[106] and Stir to Action has developed a training programme for local groups looking to acquire, manage and future-proof assets in their communities.[107] However, there is no umbrella source of support that community centres can universally tap into as these kinds of opportunities tend to focus on specific geographies; are dependent on limited funding or have certain beneficiaries in mind and do not have the reach, scale or consistency required to provide the robust investment needed.

The fragmentation within the sector impacts each centre individually, with a lack of formal peer-learning leading centres to miss out on opportunities to share best practice, innovative solutions and mutual support. The absence of accessible, up to date data on the scale and distribution of community centres in the UK, how they are owned and managed, and the number of staff and volunteers they employ makes it challenging for the sector to develop a shared identity and voice that can advocate for the needs of community centres as a collective. One interviewee stated that: "There is something about a united voice that can collectively make the case because none of us have the time, nor the clout, to speak in isolation. And there's a real question as well about where we speak – we have to have a voice at the national level."

105 Expert interview, December 2024.

106 Local Trust (2024) Community Leadership Academy. Available at: https://localtrust.org.uk/other-programmes/community-leadership-academy/.

107 Stir to Action (2025) ABCs of Community Assets. Available at: https://www.stirtoaction.com/abcs-workshops.

Current approaches to impact measurement are failing to capture the value of community centres

Community centres are expected to prove their worth according to measures that are not set up to recognise their value. This is holding back their potential. What is meaningful to people is often qualitative and yet what decision makers are looking for, whether that's funders or policymakers, is largely quantitative – focused on pre-determined metrics.[108] At the same time, much of what community centres do is inherently preventative, meaning cause and effect is difficult to determine.[109] For the community centres that took part in our research, this is a live paradox: "The charity sector exists massively in the preventative space. Proving that you've prevented something happening is almost impossible... making it hard to get funding through existing funding models because relationships are not hard outcomes."[110] This creates a tension between relational ways of working that centre around trust and connection, and expectations of service delivery and impact reporting, as expressed by community centres themselves:

"We're there to respond to need not tick boxes. We want to focus on quality not quantity - not the number of people coming through the door but how deep and impactful those relationships are. All the different reports you have to write for funders is a huge drain on capacity."[111]

"The difference we make isn't a number on a spreadsheet - it's the real difference we make in someone's life."[112]

Current approaches to measurement often amount to a collection of available data. For many organisations, this captures footfall, income generation, financial sustainability, volunteering and activity-specific

108 Studdert, J. (2021) Escaping the Community Power Evidence Paradox. New Local. Available at: https://www.newlocal.org.uk/articles/evidence-paradox/.

109 Curtis, P., Glover, B. and O'Brien, A. (2023) The Preventative State: rebuilding our local, social and civic foundations. Demos. Available at: https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/the-preventative-state.pdf.

110 New Local Community centre workshop, November 2024.

111 New Local community centre workshop, Autumn/Winter 2024.

112 New Local community centre workshop, Autumn/Winter 2024.

outcomes. While these are important to track, they don't paint a comprehensive picture of a community centre in its totality, and the ripple effects generated through its work.[113] Current approaches also fail to recognise the complex ecosystem that community centres sit within, the interplay between different assets within a particular place and the cumulative impact these places have, instead trying to attribute impact to an individual intervention.

The need for new approaches to measurement that reflect a holistic understanding of value rather than cost is increasingly understood. At the national level, Demos is calling for a new tracking and measurement system for government spending on prevention.[114] The Bennett Institute for Public Policy has proposed an alternative economic measurement framework based on the 'wealth economy' which takes into account a broader range of assets that people need to lead a meaningful life, including social and natural capital.[115] The Bennett Institute has also developed a framework for the measurement of social and cultural infrastructure that brings together quantitative and qualitative data to support policymakers to make more informed and context-specific decisions.[116] Meanwhile, HACT's Community Spaces Impact Framework for housing associations is based around three pillars – impact for individuals, impact for communities and impact for organisations – and focuses on a broad cross section of outputs and outcomes.[117]

A shift towards measurement that captures the true value of community centres would go a long way towards crystalising their essential position in the broader landscape of local assets – as goods in their own right – and provide the foundations on which to better plan for and protect them within a pluralistic system, rather than one that pushes for standardisation.

113 HACT (2024) Community benefits.

114 O'Brien, A. and Charlesworth, A. (2024) Counting what matters: how to classify, account and track spending for prevention. Demos and The Health Foundation. Available at: https://demos.co.uk/research/counting-what-matters-how-to-classify-account-and-track-spending-for-prevention/.

115 Bennett Institute for Public Policy (2019) Measuring wealth, delivering prosperity. Available at: https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/measuring-wealth-delivering-prosperity/.

116 Panayotopoulos-Tsiros, D., Garling, O., Marks, R., Alexandrova, A., Coyle, D. and Kenny, M. (2025) Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure. Bennet Institute for Public Policy.

117 HACT (2024) Community benefits.

The six core challenges outlined in this section place those running community centres under considerable pressure – without the support needed to make both their roles and their organisations sustainable for the long term. Funding shortfalls which threaten their viability and ability; old and unfit buildings; real and perceived barriers to access: all of these factors erode at a centre's capacity to do good. More often than not, people in power fail to acknowledge the ways in which community centres strengthen the fabric of place and improve the quality-of-life that people can enjoy locally. Their value is overlooked, and their contribution is regarded as a 'nice to have'. Taken together, the challenges facing community centres are preventing them from realising their full potential.

THE STRENGTHS TO BUILD ON

Despite the challenges faced and the systemic picture of fragmentation and precarity that community centres find themselves in, many play an active, strategic and essential role in the life of their place and in the lives of the individuals who they serve and work alongside. Their strengths are manifold and multifarious. This section focuses on four of them and how these can be deepened in the future:

1. Community centres are important local hubs for people to meet and connect to one another
2. Community centres support the health and wellbeing of communities
3. Community centres have a unique role to play in the local ecosystem
4. Community centres are physical assets as well as social goods

1. Community centres are important local hubs for people to meet and connect to one another

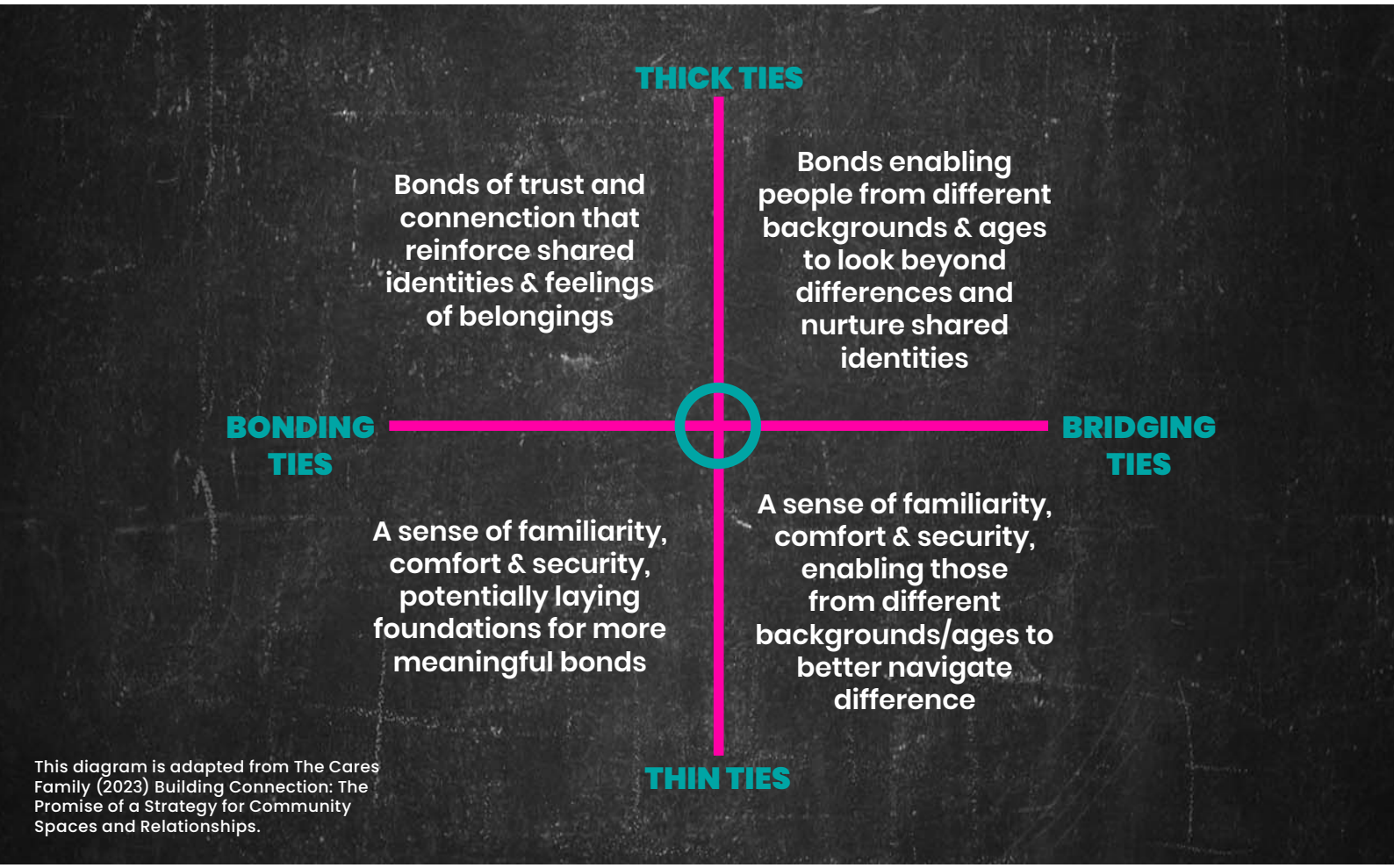
Community centres are lynchpins of social connection in local areas – they are spaces away from home, work and education where people can meet and connect to one another.[118] As some of the last remaining universal and free-to-access spaces where communities can gather, they are uniquely placed to shape the character and quality of social relationships locally.
When people bump into one another in public places like parks and high streets, it allows them to form 'thin' social ties that contribute to feelings of familiarity and a sense of safety. For these ties to become 'thick', the type of interaction has to deepen.[119] This means actively and

118 National Centre for Social Research and RSM UK Consulting (2025) Research about connecting with others via the local physical and social environment.
119 The Cares Family (2023) Building Connection: The Promise of a Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships. Available at: https://files.thecaresfamily.org.uk/thecaresfamily/images/The-Promise-of-a-Strategy-for-Community-Spaces-and-Relationships.

meaningfully engaging with others in spaces like community centres where meeting and mixing is a primary objective. By combining more structured activities with informal 'free time', community centres can provide a spectrum of opportunities to engage, helping people to build individual friendships and wider support networks.

Community centres can act as catalysts of social capital, defined by political scientist Robert Putnam as the "networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit".[120] As spaces where relationships can be built between people from different classes, faiths, ethnicities and generations, community centres can encourage 'bridging social capital' which is described as "connections that link people across a cleavage that typically divides society" – as outlined in the Figure 2.[121]

Figure 2: The forms of social value generated by social ties



This diagram is adapted from The Cares Family (2023) Building Connection: The Promise of a Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships.

120 Putnam, R. (1995). Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. Journal of Democracy, 6, 65–78.
121 Claridge, T. (2018) Functions of social capital – bonding, bridging, linking.

Community centres can help provide the scaffolding for cohesion locally. Defined as the 'glue' that binds society together,[122] the concept of community cohesion emerged within policy discourse in 2001 – after riots in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley revealed what is at stake when communities are divided.[123] The Cantle Report which followed found that communities were living 'parallel lives' and that more contact between communities was needed to prevent further violence.[124]

The presence of spaces that bring communities together and enable them to connect across lines of difference is a key piece of the puzzle. Research published by Power to Change revealed that 23 of the 27 UK cities and towns that experienced riots in the summer of 2024 performed below the median score on Onward's Social Fabric Index which measures the presence of places to meet as well as a number of other 'community strengths' like green space and neighbourliness.[125] In the search for policy solutions to division, a premium should therefore be placed on facilities that "are designed around the ethos of bringing parts of the community together," including village halls, libraries and community centres.[126]

As well as providing a space for communities to socialise and take part in fulfilling activities, community centres also offer a range of volunteering opportunities. By promoting "social contact throughout communities" and increasing "exposure to and positive awareness of" people who are different from one another, volunteering has been strongly linked to increased social cohesion.[127]

122 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2023) Social cohesion concept and measurement. UNECE. Available at: https://unece.org/statistics/publications/social-cohesion-concept-and-measurement.

123 Kelsey, T. and Kenny, M. (2021) Townscapes 7.

124 Cantle, T. (2002) Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team. Home Office. Available at: https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/resources/community-cohesion-a-report-of-the-independent-review-team/.

125 Westerling, J., Plumb, N. and McNabola, A. (2024) Fixing the foundations: A communities strategy for Britain. Power to Change. Available at: https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Fixing-the-foundations-A-communities-strategy-for-Britain_V2.pdf; see also Onward's Social Fabric Index, available at: https://www.ukonward.com/reports/2023-social-fabric-index/.

126 Kelsey, T. and Kenny, M. (2021) Townscapes 7.

127 Khan, S. (2024) The Khan Review. UK Government. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fdbfd265ca2ffef17da79c/The_Khan_review.pdf.

> **I think that the best community centres have built up that trust over time by being non-judgmental, by building genuine connection and relationships with people in the area and doing that in a way that shows they care and that those people matter to them... being there as a consistent presence in a place then gives you the capital to bring people together when it's needed, even if that might feel tricky."** – Expert interviewee

Community centres are a key partner in tackling the UK's loneliness problem. In the UK, people living in the most economically deprived areas are more likely to feel lonely often or always than those living in less deprived areas.[128] They are also more likely to be caught in a 'loneliness trap', finding it harder to escape loneliness than those in wealthier areas.[129] This can be explained, in part, by the uneven distribution of local amenities and the decline in social infrastructure which is being felt with greatest force in the poorest neighbourhoods.[130]

Community centres can play an important role in reversing this trend. They are places that are fundamentally about connection where people can share time, laughter and new experiences, but where they can also confide their worries and talk about their problems. From one interviewee's point of view, places like community centres provide "a refuge from loneliness, a sense of safety, and give you opportunities to have pride in what you're doing, and to create happy memories with other people, which in turn helps you learn about the community and other aspects of life that you might not ordinarily be exposed to". Another interviewee commented on how the services and groups run by a community centre benefit people who are socially disconnected: "especially those who are particularly lonely or haven't got those family connections, they see the groups as family. And of course, families need homes. I suppose that's how I view it - these groups need warm, welcoming, comfortable spaces. I say to them, you're welcome here, get yourself at home."

128 DCMS and DLUHC (2024) Community Life Survey 2023/24: Loneliness and support networks. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202324-annual-publication/community-life-survey-202324-loneliness-and-support-networks--2.

129 International Longevity Centre UK (2023) A life less lonely? Building connected communities. ILCUK. Available at: https://ilcuk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/ILC-Longevity-Paper-Loneliness.pdf.

130 Bolton, M. and Dessent, M. (2024) Focusing on doubly-disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

There is potential for community centres to play an important role in civic engagement. Evidence suggests that higher levels of social connection are associated with increased rates of civic engagement.[131] These spaces offer free, accessible meeting spaces, help people to feel like they belong and their voice matters, and provide the opportunity and invitation to participate in conversations around issues that impact their lives. In this way, community centres can build people's capacity and capability to become active in their community and engaged in civil society. They can act as catalysts for 'community power', enabling communities to get closer to and have the opportunity to influence the decisions that affect their lives.[132]

The collective value derived from social connection helps create better and healthier places to live, whilst reducing pressure on stretched public services and finances.[133] Disconnection within communities has been shown to cost the UK approximately £32 billion annually[134] while a lack of integration is estimated to cost approximately £6 billion each year.[135] A lack of involvement in community activities has been found to lower self-esteem, heighten health risks and create unhappiness, contributing to a loss of productivity with an estimated net cost to the economy of nearly £12 billion every year.[136] As spaces where people meet and build relationships with one another, community centres and wider social infrastructure can be "the engine for social capital creation and the bedrock for economic growth".[137] For example, there is evidence to suggest that investing in community centres could lead to sizeable public spending savings at a relatively low cost through "an

131 U.S. Surgeon General (2023) Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation.

132 New Local (2024) Community Power. Available at: https://www.newlocal.org.uk/research/community-power/.

133 Haldane, A. and Halpern, D. (2025) Social Capital 2025: The Hidden Wealth of Nations. Demos. Available at: https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Social-Capital-2025_The-Hidden-Wealth-of-Nations.pdf.

134 The Eden Project (2017) The cost of disconnected communities. Available at: https://www.safercommunitiesscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Big-Lunch_Cebr-report_Jan2017_FINAL-3-0.pdf.

135 This is specifically through long-term unemployment (£1.5bn), recruitment and career progression (£0.7bn) and through health and well-being costs, including cardiovascular diseases (£1.2bn) and health and social care provision for people who are isolated (£0.7bn). See Social Integration Commission (2014) Social Integration: A wake-up call. Available at: https://tedcantle.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/090-social-integration-commission-wake-up-call.pdf.

136 The Eden Project (2017) The cost of disconnected communities.

137 Haldane, A. and Halpern, D. (2025) Social Capital 2025.

increase in employment or volunteering, a reduction in health service visits, especially among older people, and more appropriate and timely access to public services."[138]

The vital work delivered by community centres to build social connection has significant personal, local and national benefits, creating the space for people to meet and mix with those who are both like and unlike them – where fun and friendship bloom and problems are shared. The issues that fuel division and disconnection are deep rooted and systemic; by no means should responsibility for addressing them be placed on the shoulders of community centres. But given their unique and trusted position at the heart of communities, they should have the necessary resources and support to help build the bonds that tie communities together.

2. Community centres support the health and wellbeing of communities

As trusted spaces with deep local roots, community centres play a preventative role that is helping to address unmet health needs in local areas, especially when what they offer is a product of local insight and input. This finding aligns with increasingly established thinking across policy, practice and research about the important role of activity and organisations that sit outside the formal health service in helping people improve and maintain their health and wellbeing. Community centres help alleviate pressures on the health system, provide space for co-location of services, and directly deliver health and wellbeing activities – with short, medium and long-term benefits.

Community centres can be effective partners in alleviating short-term pressure on the overstretched health and care system and improving people's health and wellbeing. Evidence suggests that 20% of GP visits are for a non-medical need, with people seeking support for things like loneliness and housing problems.[139] In an effort to meet growing

138 Frontier Economics (2022) Rapid evidence review of community initiatives. DCMS. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rapid-evidence-review-of-community-initiatives/rapid-evidence-review-of-community-initiatives.

139 Sirois, F. and Owens, J. (2021) A meta-analysis of loneliness and use of primary health care. *Health Psychology Review*, 17(2), 193–210. https://doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2021.1986417.

demand from patients facing a range of challenges, GP practices in Barking, East London, ran drop-in outreach clinics in partnership with several community centres in the area. Working closely with North-East London NHS Foundation Trust and the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, the collaboration aimed to bring support and advice into community settings and connect people to local services and activities, including foodbanks, cooking classes and walking groups.[140] This helped free up time for GPs to focus on patients with medical needs.

Some community centres are alleviating system pressures by stepping in to provide much needed mental health support for people in their area. More than 1.8 million people are on the waiting list for NHS mental health services, with long waits for care having serious knock-on effects.[141] This has seen some community centres adapt their spaces and services to provide an alternative. Health for All is a Leeds based charity responsible for seven community centres across the city. The charity set up a suicide prevention project which "meets gaps in terms of the huge waiting lists for people who have got mental health struggles."[142] Through the project, individuals receive one-to-one support from a staff member trained in counselling, "but it's almost like a gateway to a whole lot of other services, whether it's the pantries or a woodworking group or a singing group or a wellbeing support group."[143]

> **"Community buildings offer a place where people can come together, socialise, make friends, and what's been really interesting over the lifetime of the programmes we've been doing is how much more open people have become about mental health. It was something very much tiptoed around, and now people talk about it really openly, especially the demographic you'd least expect – 70+ men."** – Expert interviewee

140 NHS North East London (2023) Hundreds receive health and lifestyle help at free drop-in clinics in Barking. Available at: https://northeastlondon.icb.nhs.uk/news/hundreds-receive-health-and-lifestyle-help-at-free-drop-in-clinics-in-barking/.

141 Four in five people have experienced a deterioration in their mental health while waiting for support. Of those, 64% have experienced a mental health crisis, 25% have attempted suicide, 42% have turned to urgent and emergency care, and 22% have had contact with the police due to their distress. See Rethink Mental Illness (2024) Right Treatment, Right Time. Available at: https://www.rethink.org/media/dz4b1ydr/right-treatment-right-time-report.pdf.

142 Expert interview, December 2024.

143 Ibid.

> **In some places there has been a move to join services up physically, with statutory services locating within community centres themselves.**

This can offer an integrated and simpler access point to health and wellbeing support in a way that is approachable and easier to navigate. Par Bay Community Trust in Cornwall set up a multi-purpose community centre to provide a central space where residents could gather, participate in activities and access services.[144] The local NHS primary care network rents two of the centre's tenant rooms which are now home to a social prescribing service and prediabetes clinics. They run regular diabetes support workshops, a Pain Café and fall prevention sessions.[145]

> **On a practical level, what we see in many of the places we work in is you'll have a community building which is managed by a third sector organisation but within that building there are public services coming in and out. It might be the nurse coming in once a week to do checkups or it might be a work support programme coming in. And then there are also services commissioned by public bodies but delivered by voluntary bodies, particularly in health and social care, often in a more flexible way than the public sector would deliver it."** – Expert interviewee

As well as hosting healthcare providers, community centres directly deliver health and wellbeing initiatives themselves. Rather than medicalising the challenges people face in their everyday lives, community centres can offer holistic, relational support that gets to the underlying causes, helping to address the social determinants of health. This often takes the shape of inclusive, fun, non-judgmental and non-threatening activities like cooking, socialising, dance and crafts. Participation in community centre activities has been shown to improve psycho-social wellbeing and health-related behaviours, helping to reduce stress and anxiety, increase physical activity, promote healthy eating and build confidence.[146]

144 NHS Confederation (2024) Par Bay Big Local. Available at: https://www.nhsconfed.org/case-studies/par-bay-big-local.

145 Par Bay Community Trust (2024) Cornubia. Available at: https://www.parbay.org.uk/cornubia.

146 Jones, M., Kimberlee, R., Deave, T. and Evans, S. (2013) The Role of Community Centre-based Arts, Leisure and Social Activities.

By helping to keep people healthy and connected,[147] community centres make a significant contribution to the prevention agenda that is taking root locally and nationally, in partnership with other organisations and services that operate across the local ecosystem, as well as with communities themselves (see the Health for All case study on page 62-64).

What social prescribing means for community centres

Social prescribing has gained significant recognition and widespread adoption within the NHS in recent years, and primary health care providers are increasingly 'prescribing' community centre activities to their patients. An approach that connects people to support networks and community-based activities, social prescribing has been heavily influenced by the preventative power of community centres. However, the funding attached to community centre activities that are socially prescribed is often inadequate, short term and fragmented, and sometimes non-existent.[148] There is evidence that "many public services take the view that community hubs can provide services for free because 'that's what they do'"[149] and that the "notion that the voluntary sector is just 'there' is still so ingrained in many people's mindset".[150] This has repercussions for communities, with people being sent "from pillar to post" between organisations that do not have the means to provide the necessary support.[151] The need to address this has been recognised by the National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP). NASP has proposed an England-wide Social Prescribing Fund of £1 billion over 10 years for community-based social prescribing activities to make it easier for charities and voluntary organisations to keep delivering effective programmes.[152]

147 A growing body of evidence shows the impact of social isolation on health and wellbeing outcomes. For example, people who feel lonely are 2.25 times more likely to have been diagnosed with depression and weak social connections increase the likelihood of early death by 50%. See: Reed, Z. et al (2024) Investigating the impact of loneliness and social isolation on health. Nesta. Available at: https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Investigating_the_impact_of_loneliness_and_social_isolation_on_health_zCxBqhE.pdf and Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., & Layton, J. B. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review. PLoS medicine, 7(7), e1000316. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316.

148 National Academy for Social Prescribing (2024) Envisaging A Social Prescribing Fund in England. Available at: https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/media/wvnenhti/envisaging-a-social-prescribing-fund.pdf.

149 Trup, N., Carrington, D. and Wyler, S. (2019) Community hubs.

150 Expert interview, January 2025.

151 Expert interview, January 2025.

152 National Academy for Social Prescribing (2024) Envisaging A Social Prescribing Fund in England.

Putting communities in charge of their own health and wellbeing in Leeds

Set up more than three decades ago to tackle health inequalities in south Leeds, Health for All is now responsible for seven community centres across the city, all of them in areas marked by high levels of economic deprivation. Each was at risk of closure or already closed when the charity took it on, and each takeover was at the request of the community. All of the centres are different, offering tailored activities and services informed by a community health development approach. The charity listens to what local people want and what their unmet needs are, whether that relates to social isolation, health and wellbeing, access to services or peer support.

"They all started in different ways. We didn't set them up for the sake of it." - Pat McGeever, Chief Executive, Health for All

Across the various sites, people can access mental health peer support, community transport, employment programmes and a community café. The centres host local GP services, a woodworking club, a Happy Grandmas group and mental health peer support, and they are home to a skills hub, community gardens, food pantries, a multiuse games area – and much more in between. These are all services developed by and for the community.[153]

153 Health for All (2024) Annual Review 2023-2024.

Many of the activities on offer are delivered in partnership with other local charities and with communities themselves. Health for All acts as a facilitator, providing local people with the resources to launch and run their own initiatives; helping them to set up small, community-led groups, apply for small grants and recruit volunteers, as well as offering peer support for group leaders.[154] With more than 50 small groups now active, from a walking club to a Bangladeshi women's collective, the model allows the charity to remain flexible and responsive to locally identified needs, while also empowering people to be part of the solution to the challenges they face.

Much of what Health for All does is about helping people to build confidence and skills – with far-reaching effects. For example, the Menspace initiative provides those who are socially isolated or struggling with their health with a space to connect with others and take part in fulfilling activities like tending to allotments or woodworking in the charity's dedicated skills hub. Many of the men who have taken part have moved into further learning, volunteering and employment opportunities.

"People feel that we're here for the long haul - for as long as they need us." - Pat McGeever, Chief Executive, Health for All

The approach is consistent, relational and long term – some of the centres have worked with multiple generations of the same family.[155] As a result, the centres have become trusted local spaces that support 11,000 people each year. The impact of this work has been recognised by statutory partners, including the public health team at Leeds City Council, which has funded some of the charity's community-based health and well-being activities since 2017.[156]

154 Vernelle, R. (2017) Better Together health and wellbeing service launched. South Leeds Life. Available at: https://southleedslife.com/better-together-health-wellbeing-service-launched/.

155 Case study developed from interview.

156 Health for All (2023) Healthy Communities. Available at: https://www.healthforall.org.uk/our-areas-of-work/improving-health/healthy-communities-service/.

Whether delivering activities that support the health and happiness of communities or providing a bridge into other forms of advice, community centres "support people to navigate a complex world" and "give hope to the system that we can do things differently".[157] When at their best, they operate in a highly context specific way, based on deep knowledge of their community and local leadership – as emphasised by the range of case study examples outlined above. Their power as catalysts and stewards of health locally can deepen if their true value is recognised and nurtured.

3. Community centres have a unique and valuable role to play in the local ecosystem

Community centres occupy a distinct and valuable position in local areas, both physically and operationally, but also in the hearts and minds of communities: "If our centre disappeared it would pull the thread on the fabric that holds everything together", was how one research participant put it.[158] When a community centre is thriving, it is both a place where people can meet their basic needs and somewhere that adds colour to people's lives, providing a sense of calm or joy, connecting them with their community – its history and culture – and generating a sense of belonging, attachment and local pride. In these ways, community centres are uniquely placed to respond to the diversity of human need, experience and aspiration that exists locally. If their role and expertise is fully understood by local partners, community centres can make a real and tangible contribution to strategic decision-making about the future of our places.

Policymakers are increasingly focusing on the opportunities for greater impact through place-based working. There is growing recognition of the merits of place-based working across Whitehall. Devolution is widening and deepening across England – with new strategic authorities and mayors with significant powers and funding – designed to shift power out of Westminster.[159] These plans involve the increasing spread

157 New Local community centre workshop, November 2024.

158 New Local community centre workshop, November 2024.

159 MHCLG (2024) English Devolution White Paper: Power and partnership: Foundations for growth. UK Government. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth.

of integrated funding settlements – consolidated budgets across housing, regeneration, local growth, local transport, skills, retrofit and employment support.[160] Separately, the NHS is moving in a more place-based direction, with 'triple devolution' set to push power and resources out of Whitehall to integrated care boards, providers and patients.[161] As foundations are laid for the NHS 10 Year Plan, steps are being taken to develop neighbourhood health and care services – hailed as the way forward in Lord Darzi's report on the state of the NHS in England.[162] Beyond health, the Department for Work and Pensions is devolving employment support[163] and the Cabinet Office has initiated a programme of Test, Learn and Grow sites that will be home to innovative partnerships between central government, councils, businesses and local organisations.[164]

So far much of the focus of devolution has been about getting the structures in place – the 'what'. It is essential that attention is also paid to the 'how' – how local and regional governments and place-based partners are enabled to work in joined-up and innovative ways on the issues that matter most to their communities. Within this, shifting power beyond the 'town hall' is an essential component to develop within a wider devolution agenda – with the neighbourhood as a powerful unit for change around which services can integrate and connect with community organisations and wider community capacity, as the work of the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods has set out.[165] To ensure maximum impact, increasing recognition of the role of the hyperlocal level, ensuring that community centres are fully involved in these shifts, will be important.

160 MHCLG (2024) Integrated Settlements for Mayoral Combined Authorities. UK Government. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/integrated-settlements-for-mayoral-combined-authorities.

161 Streeting, W. (2024) Our ambition to reform the NHS. UK Government. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/our-ambition-to-reform-the-nhs.

162 DHSC (2024) Independent investigation of the NHS in England. UK Government. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-investigation-of-the-nhs-in-england.

163 DWP (2024) Biggest employment reforms in a generation unveiled to Get Britain Working again. UK Government. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/biggest-employment-reforms-in-a-generation-unveiled-to-get-britain-working-again.

164 Cabinet Office (2024) Pat McFadden vows to make the state "more like a start up" as he deploys reform teams across country. UK Government. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pat-mcfadden-vows-to-make-the-state-more-like-a-start-up-as-he-deploys-reform-teams-across-country.

165 Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (2025) Think Neighbourhoods: A new approach to fixing the country's biggest policy challenges. Available at: https://www.neighbourhoodscommission.org.uk/report/interim-report-think-neighbourhoods/.

Pioneering and innovative people are already coming together across the public sector, the voluntary sector and in communities to find new ways of working collaboratively to have greater impact in their places. The local state is also recognising that greater impact can be secured working together rather than in siloed isolation, and place-based collaborations are on the rise.[166] For example, in North-East Sheffield a new £1 million community fund has been launched by NHS South Yorkshire and Sheffield City Council, working with the local voluntary and community sector. Focused on four neighbourhoods which face inequality and deprivation and informed by active community engagement in its design, the fund aims to support longer-term prevention by building community networks and connections.[167] In North Birkenhead, the voluntary sector, local public agencies and the community have come together to put community priorities and families' needs at the heart of decision-making, working towards the collective goal of improving life chances.[168] In both of these examples, power is being shared to better enable communities to participate in decisions that matter to them.

As the momentum continues to grow around place-based ways of working, there is an important opportunity to ensure the unique role and expertise of community centres is understood. As local mainstays with a deep understanding of what makes their communities work, community centres should play an important role in shaping new and experimental approaches locally. The staff and volunteers that keep community centres running are a crucial source of their value – "a visible presence of what the centre is".[169] Over time, they have built up trust within their communities by being non-judgmental, establishing genuine connections with people in the area and doing so in a way that shows they care about those people – their experiences and

166 Studdert, J. (2025) What is the 'new local'? Power, prevention and place. New Local. Available at: https://www.newlocal.org.uk/articles/what-is-the-new-local-power-prevention-and-place/.

167 South Yorkshire Integrated Care Board (2025) £1million community fund for North-East Sheffield. Available at: https://southyorkshire.icb.nhs.uk/news/1million-community-fund-north-east-sheffield.

168 Oglethorpe, K. (2024) Cradle to Career: How place-based collaboration is transforming North Birkenhead. New Local. Available at: https://www.newlocal.org.uk/articles/cradle-to-career/.

169 New Local community centre workshop, November 2024.

perspectives. By working in equal partnership with these local experts, connecting with communities about the issues that really matter to them, there is an opportunity for community insights to more deeply inform the design and delivery of services.

Taking a whole-neighbourhood approach in South London

A former Settlement House in Southwark, Pembroke House is a vibrant community hub that is taking a whole-neighbourhood approach. Through collaborations of residents, organisations, funders, statutory bodies and local and national government, the hub works to tackle issues that no single organisation can solve on its own.[170] Drawing on shared knowledge, practice and resources, the approach enables partners to become more than the sum of their parts, culminating in initiatives like the Walworth Neighbourhood Food Model that is tackling the root causes of food insecurity locally.[171]

Community centres can build effective bridges into communities, but there is a risk that they become less flexible and responsive if statutory models are imposed. The opportunities presented in this section need to be carefully balanced – community centres are not just places where public services are delivered, nor are they just vehicles through which to meet statutory objectives. Community centres operate with a greater degree of agility and flexibility than statutory services or formal institutions that can be "big, heavy, burdensome and slow".[172] This means that they can adapt to meet evolving local needs, whether that is demographic shifts or in the face of crises (see pages 68-69).[173]

170 Pembroke House (2023) Collaboration and Partnership. Available at: https://www.pembrokehouse.org.uk/collaboration-and-partnership/.

171 Pembroke House (2024) Walworth Neighbourhood Food Model. Available at: https://www.pembrokehouse.org.uk/walworth-neighbourhood-food-model-blog-update/.

172 New Local focus group with local authorities, November 2024.

173 See for example: Wilson, M., McCabe, A., Macmillan, R. and Ellis Paine, A. (2020) Community responses to COVID-19: the role and contribution of community-led infrastructure. Local Trust. Available at: https://www.youngfoundation.org/institute-for-community-studies/repository/rapid-research-covid-19-briefing-8-community-responses-to-covid-19-the-role-and-contribution-of-community-led-infrastructure/ and Frontier Economics, Kaleidoscope Health and Care and Rand Europe (2020) Health and Social Care Innovation, Research and Collaboration in Response to COVID-19.

Their ability to do this risks being undermined if statutory models are imposed and their role is instrumentalised.[174]

> **"How do you make policymakers understand that these spaces aren't always about directly delivering or meeting goals for them, but actually they will meet these goals through how they work. They lead to downstream benefits, so you can't necessarily understand how people are going to benefit from them, but they will benefit from them. How do you build an acceptance that just investing in them as spaces where stuff happens will start to tackle some of these policy challenges without tackling them head on?"** - Expert interviewee

Community centres come into their own in times of crisis

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, community centres' ability to respond at pace meant they were at the heart of many local responses, co-ordinating local action and catalysing new ways of working between partners locally.[175] From distributing food parcels to providing support to isolated residents over the phone, community centres "came into their own by quickly pivoting towards emergency support."[176]

174 NHS Confederation (2024) The case for neighbourhood health and care. Available at: https://www.nhsconfed.org/system/files/2024-10/The-case-for-neighbourhood-health-and-care.pdf; Curtis, P., Glover, B. and O'Brien, A. (2023) The Preventative State.

175 Locality (2020) We Were Built for This: How community organisations helped us through the coronavirus crisis – and how we can build a better future. Locality. Available at: https://locality.org.uk/assets/images/We-were-built-for-this-Locality-2020.06.13.pdf.

176 Langdale, E., Macmillan, R., O'Flynn, L., Oxborrow, L. and Wilson, M. (Community responses to COVID-19: Community hubs as social infrastructure. Local Trust. Available at: https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/COVID-19-Briefing-13-FINAL-1.pdf.

In the pandemic's aftermath, resilience against the ongoing economic damage has become increasingly important, made even more urgent by the rising cost of living.[177] This has seen community centres adapt how they work, with "quite a lot of organisations changing their focus quite significantly from wider social activities which were there to enable people to have fun, develop and learn to much more overt poverty mitigation."[178] Their experience of responding to identified community need in this way puts community centres in a strong position to plan for and respond to the needs of the future. For example, some community centres are thinking more strategically about food poverty, building wider connections beyond their local community to address this challenge, with interventions that go deeper than food banks.[179]

As well as food poverty, there is potential for community centres to contribute to climate mitigation and adaptation as climate change intensifies. This could include modifying supply chains or helping to raise awareness about climate issues locally,[180] and there are examples of where this is already taking place. Health for All runs a project in Beeston, Leeds to promote and facilitate climate awareness and action by engaging communities in education and innovative action, including reclaiming green space and recycling.[181] There is potential for more community centres to play this type of role: "Lots of places do local food growing and shortening supply chains and I think that could be a bigger role [for community centres] in future, almost modelling more sustainable futures for the neighbourhood. But that would have to come with the right support."[182]

In spite of these strengths, it would be unfair for community centres to be seen as a place of first resort only during crises, reduced to emergency lifelines when the going gets tough – they have a role to play in good times and in bad.

177 More than 60% of the lowest income households went without essentials such as food, heating, toiletries or showers in 2020. See Brown, R., Wilson, C. and Begum, Y. (2023) The Price We Pay: the social impact of the cost-of-living crisis. The National Centre for Social Impact. Available at: https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-07/Society%20Watch%202023_The%20Price%20We%20Pay_the%20social%20impact%20of%20the%20cost%20of%20living%20crisis.pdf.

178 Expert interview, November 2024.

179 Wilson, M., McCabe, A., Macmillan, R. and Ellis Paine, A. (2020) Community responses to COVID-19.

180 Locality (2023) Responding to the climate emergency. Available at: https://locality.org.uk/resources/responding-climate-emergency.

181 Health for All (2024) Annual Review 2023-2024.

182 Expert interview, November 2024.

4. Community centres are physical assets as well as social goods

The physical space that a community centre operates out of directly impacts its long-term resilience and ability to respond to the changing needs of the people it serves and works alongside – both now and into the future. The quality of that physical space can have a profound impact on people's health and happiness. This is not to say that community centres cannot thrive without being of high-quality design. However, investing in the maintenance of existing spaces as well as identifying opportunities to invest in new, well-designed buildings can ensure accessibility and sustainability, enabling community centres to play a vital role in a place's social and green infrastructure. High-quality design can also reflect the cultural, social, natural and historical context of an area, creating spaces that are enjoyable to spend time in, that make a place feel invested in, that meet locally identified needs, and that people feel proud of and connected to.

An established body of evidence demonstrates the ways in which physical spaces shape our health and happiness. For instance, the quality of school buildings has been shown to help or hinder learning and teaching.[183] Poor quality housing is known to cause and worsen illness, cutting lives short.[184] The quality of public space has been shown to be an equally, if not more important, correlate of sense of community than the size or quantity of public spaces.[185] Spending time in places that have personal meaning is known to boost feelings of wellbeing.[186] In these ways, the quality of the physical space that a person has access to is linked to the quality of life that they can enjoy.

183 Barrett, P., Treves, A., Shmis, T., Ambasz, D. and Ustinova, M. (2019) The Impact of School Infrastructure on Learning. The World Bank. Available at: https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/ru/853821543501252792/pdf/132579-PUB-Impact-of-School.pdf.

184 Finch, D., Farrington-Douglas, J. and Johnes, C. (2023) Moving to healthy homes. The Health Foundation. Available at: https://www.health.org.uk/reports-and-analysis/briefings/moving-to-healthy-homes.

185 Francis, J., Giles-Corti, B., Wood, L. and Knuiman, M. (2012) Creating sense of community: The role of public space. Journal of Environmental Psychology. Volume 32, Issue 4. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2012.07.002.

186 Te National Trust (2017) Places that make us. Available at: https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/binaries/content/assets/website/national/pdf/places-that-make-us.pdf.

What does a community centre mean? For me at least, it throws up a 1980s single-story building with a flat roof."
– Expert interviewee

Negative perceptions persist around the character and condition of community centres

– there is a tendency to think of them as uninspiring and run-down buildings. However, noteworthy examples exist of beautiful, high-quality community centres in the UK. In Fulham, Sands End Community Centre is a multi-award-winning, state-of-the art building next to the borough's biggest housing estate. Made from raw materials in keeping with the centre's park-side location, it has been designed to ensure durability and adaptability.[187] An unused church in Bolton has been transformed into a modern community centre that preserves the original beauty of the building while incorporating contemporary design (see the All Souls Bolton case study on page 74-75). In Glasgow, the century-old Kinning Park Complex, a former school building-turned-community-centre, has been renovated with colour and joy in mind.[188] Whether creating a brand new, purpose-built centre or breathing life back into an existing building, investing in a community in these ways can create significant knock-on effects, impacting social connection, civic pride and cultural identity.[189]

"These are not just shared spaces that are adequate or okay, which I think a lot of community centres in the past have been – painted those awful municipal colours with depressing chairs. These are spaces that are really high-quality, that you would expect to find in more affluent areas... I think that's one of the issues that community centres have had in the past – they just became poor quality spaces that didn't deliver for or appeal to a mix of people." – Expert interviewee

187 Opened in 2022, this is a community-run and council-owned community centre built as part of the council's arts strategy and fully funded by Tideway and Chelsea Football Club. See London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham (2022) Sands End Arts & Community Centre. Available at: https://www.lbhf.gov.uk/community/sands-end-arts-community-centre.

188 The renovation is being funded through a number of capital development grant funds including the National Lottery and The Scottish Government Regeneration Capital Grant Fund. See Our Place (2024) Kinning Park Complex. Available at: https://www.ourplace.scot/case-study/kinning-park-complex.

189 Future of London (2021) People, Place & Community. Available at: https://www.futureoflondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/delightful-downloads/2021/03/People-Place-Community-report-29-03-2021.pdf.

At their best, community centres are universal, inclusive and accessible spaces that are relevant and appealing to the whole community. The principle of co-design is helping some community centres to achieve this. By valuing the lived and felt experience of the people that a space is intended for – whether that is the residents of a particular housing development or a wider community – co-design has a lasting impact, creating a sense of belonging and attachment. The Green in Southwark is a low-energy community centre, built by the council and run by residents. To create a shared ambition for the centre, architects ran an extensive brief development process with Nunhead's Voice – a local community group – before engaging the wider public through 18 months of consultation. This included events, workshops and meetings, with Nunhead's Voice "keen to reach out to the most diverse range of potential users", and culminated in a building "that is particular to the place and resonates with its past".[190]

> **"There's a sense of attachment that people have to places that work for them – they want to keep going back"** – Expert interviewee

When community centres interact with and respond to their surrounding environment they can become vital parts of a place's green infrastructure, particularly in built-up areas. By integrating allotments, community gardens and other green spaces, community centres can provide opportunities to connect with nature. From lowering anxiety to boosting concentration, this has a range of well-established benefits.[191] Green spaces can also encourage communities to engage with their local ecosystem, learn about wider environmental issues and develop new skills. In East Ayrshire, Netherthird Community Centre turned a 2.4-acre field into a public park and community garden. Through food-growing initiatives, these spaces are helping to tackle social isolation while also providing food for the on-site cafe.[192] Langney Community Centre in Eastbourne used permaculture design principles to create a community garden featuring vegetable beds, an orchard and a forest

190 AOC (2023) The Green. Available at: https://www.theaoc.co.uk/projects/the-green/.

191 Mental Health Foundation (2022) Nature: How connecting with nature benefits our mental health. Available at: https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/MHAW21-Nature-research-report.pdf.

192 Expert interview, November 2024.

garden with plants that can be foraged. Through these spaces, the centre aims to bolster local food security and host outdoor community gatherings and educational workshops.[193]

Designing for environmental and economic sustainability

Sustainable practices can support the economic viability of community centres, many of which currently face onerous running costs. Whether that's installing solar panels on the roof or ground source heat pumps inside, making changes to windows and improving thermal efficiency, this can save community centres money, help future-proof their physical space, while also contributing to net zero carbon ambitions locally. Some community centres have already made these adaptations.

> **"We've got solar panels on the roof and we also got funding for batteries to store it. So we use some of our own electricity and then we sell some back to the grid. We've got an electric van that goes and gets the shopping for the centre, for the cafe and the larder, and we've got our electric charging point. We did all of that ourselves."** – Expert interviewee

There is an opportunity to widen access to high-quality community centres through national plans for new towns and local regeneration. Contemporary design and placemaking have increasingly deprioritised spaces for social connection, with communal and civic spaces replaced by private ownership and profit.[194] Reversing this trend is essential for the social, economic and civic wellbeing of our places. The government's plans for new towns[195] and its Plan for Neighbourhoods – a £1.5 billion regeneration programme targeting 75 areas across the UK – present

193 Eastbourne ECO Action Network (2024) Growing Food in a Changing Climate: A Community Centre View. Available at: https://ecoactioneb.co.uk/growing-food-in-a-changing-climate-a-community-centre-view.

194 The Loneliness Lab (2020) Using design to connect us. Available at: https://www.lonelinesslab.org/knowledge-hub/using-design-to-connect-us.

195 MHCLG (2024) Policy statement on new towns. UK Government. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/policy-statement-on-new-towns/policy-statement-on-new-towns.

an opportunity to do so if community centres are factored in, designed in collaboration with communities, and looked after with care.

"In the context of urban extensions, new towns or new housing estates or whatever it might be, it's about seeing those places not just as physical spaces or on a balance sheet in terms of the cost of putting them in, but actually to see them as part of a long-term vision for place, which enables a sense of belonging to people and to place to be nurtured". – Expert interviewee

Creating a modern community space within a once-neglected heritage building in Bolton

Built in 1881, All Souls Church is a Grade II* listed Gothic Revival building in Bolton, Greater Manchester. After closing its doors in the 1980s, it became a target for graffiti, vandalism and theft. It grew "less and less relevant to the local community"[196] despite growing local need for community spaces as council-owned community centres and other community facilities were being closed. That was until 2007, when Bolton resident Inayat Omarji began working with the Churches Conservation Trust (CCT) to breathe new life into the building.[197]

196 Historic England (2014) All Souls, Bolton. Available at: https://historicengland.org.uk/content/heritage-counts/pub/2014/case-study-all-souls-bolton-pdf/.

197 We're Right Here (2022) Inayat's story: bringing community to an abandoned church. Available at: https://www.right-here.org/inayats-story/.

At the early stages of the project, a broad consultation process gathered ideas and insights from people locally about what they wanted and felt that the local area needed. There was little appetite for the building to be solely a heritage asset. Instead, plans emerged for a vibrant centre for the whole community. Building work began in 2013, with a £4.3 million grant secured from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, plus additional funds from the CCT, English Heritage and Bolton Council.

Open to the public since 2014, the centre incorporates an innovative 'pod' design, created by OMI Architects and driven by a commitment to "preserve the original beauty of the church while incorporating the very best of contemporary design."[198] Two three-storey pods sit within the main body of the church. Together they provide multifunctional areas to suit a range of purposes, including for community businesses, local groups, events, a café and heritage and community activities. The site also features a multimedia exhibition on local history which was co-created with the community.[199]

"All Souls is a very futuristic architectural design, and it appealed to young people just as much as it did to some of the older generations within that community; each could either project onto it memories of things past or they could really see something there for them, both now and in the future."[200]

From chair-based yoga for the elderly to martial arts classes for children to a mother and toddler group, All Souls is now at the heart of community life. It's a place where people can connect and learn new skills; it serves as a hub for local businesses; and it is once again a venue where people can celebrate important occasions in their lives.

198 Churches Conservation Trust (2021) Rising to the challenge at All Souls', Bolton. Available at: https://www.visitchurches.org.uk/what-we-do/blog/rising-to-the-challenge-at-all-souls-bolton.html.

199 Churches Conservation Trust (2021) Rising to the challenge at All Souls', Bolton.

200 Case study developed from interview.

This part of the report has explored the vital role community centres play today – as stewards of health and wellbeing, hubs of connection, key parts of local ecosystems and physical community assets. The next part looks ahead to what community centres could become: vibrant, inclusive hubs that are financially secure, environmentally sustainable and deeply embedded in local decision-making.

4. A VISION FOR THE COMMUNITY CENTRE OF 2040

This vision is grounded in the past and present of community centres and inspired by workshops with the Sutton Centre in Bradford, Trinity Rooms Community Hub in Stroud and Shenley Court Hall in Birmingham (see more information on each on pages 87-89).

As part of the workshops people were asked to imagine what life might be like in 15 years' time and how their centre would respond. Each centre had a very different building, team, demographic and governance structure but some unifying principles and behaviours emerged that underpin the place they would want to be in 2040. These have been supplemented with insights from expert interviews as well as desk research.

This vision is not intended to be a one size fits all. Each community centre is unique to its place – its people and its location. We have aimed to demonstrate that through the 'Versions of the Future' which can be found on pages 90-94. The vision is followed by a set of enabling factors that need to be in place to allow these community centres of the future to fully emerge. In fact, many community centres around the UK are already practicing many of the behaviours and are underscored by the principles captured in the vision and the accompanying versions. In such cases, the visionary aspect lies not in changing the community centres themselves, but in shifting the behaviours of their partners and transforming the systems in which they operate.

Finally, on pages 82-85 we propose a series of recommendations that will take us from 2025 – 2040.

2040: The Community Centre

We are purposeful: we know why we're here; the difference we make; the people we serve; the community we're part of and the ecosystem that we operate in. We are here for, and think into, the long-term.

Human Connection

We are first and foremost a place of human connection. When you come through these doors there's no expectation - you don't have to be here to do something – this is a place to come and just be, if that's what you want. It's a place people feel they belong. Relationships are central and people trust us.

A Place of Pride

We're not a place of last resort, but first resort. Our team is amazing: motivated, passionate, committed, strategic, intelligent. We feel cared for and are well looked after. Joy and fun run deep here.

Inherently Preventative

We work alongside people to go on their journey with them, into the life they want to live. Because we know people and what might be coming up for them, we help avert crisis and get to problems before they start to take over people's lives. We really see ourselves as a place of lifelong education, preparing all of us for an uncertain and complex future.

Relevant and Responsive

We are reliable and offer consistency that people can depend on. People in our community see themselves reflected in the wide range of activities that we offer. They are relevant and responsive to their needs and wants, built on a deep understanding of who lives here.

These activities are complemented by targeted and specialist services that speak to our place. Our aim is to provide a holistic response to each person who comes through our doors.

Champions of our Community

We support people to realise their own value. We build people's confidence and belief in their own power as stewards of this community. That starts with here – no one is ever a 'user', they are active, equal shapers of this place.

We advocate for our community beyond our building. We harness what we learn every day from our community and use that to influence across systems – local to national.

Not a 'nice-to-have'

The crises or the permacrisis we're living in has heightened everyone's understanding of our importance. We are recognised for our deep understanding of our community, rooted in the relationships we have with the people who live here, the networks that exist and our strategic understanding of how they can come together to be bigger than the sum of their parts.

We are equal, respected and valued partners - not a 'nice-to-have' but a core, dynamic, essential part of our place.

WHO WE ARE

Strategic
Networked
Reliable
Cared for
Joyful
Adaptable
Consistent
Non-bureaucratic
Inclusive
Responsive
Purposeful
Connected
Relevant
Trusted
Collaborative
Accessible

WHAT WE CAN DO

Green space

Piloting new projects and ways of working

Part of neighbourhood plans and planning

Meeting spaces

Part of local supply chains

Concurrent activities

Ability to influence national systems

Crisis resources

Co-location of essential services

Resource sharing

Fitness facilities

Basic amenities: showers, clothes washing

Hosting of community groups

Renewable energy sources

Birthdays, weddings, funerals

Skills development

Enabling Factors

This vision will not be realised by community centres alone. There are multiple ways in which partners can amend their practices and reform their systems to create an empowering environment for community centres.

Partner	Vision	How change has come about
Policymakers	An awareness and understanding that community centres are strategic organisations that are a core part of a thriving place's ecosystem; considered and consulted as part of policy creation.	Consistent advocacy and campaigning from across civil society
Local authorities, housing and health	Recognition of the expertise and knowledge that community centres have. Work with them as peers, clear in the complementary skills and assets they bring. Enable the centres' work through technical support and guidance, facilitating across the ecosystem and supporting with funding and other resources.	Progressive public sector reform that has centred community power with a sector now skilled in collaborative, deliberative practice and experienced in power sharing.
Funders	Fund long-term, core work, which is clear that the central tenet of a community centre's work is universal and preventative with light-touch monitoring and evaluation. Capacity and capability-building support is an integral part of the funding package as well as mandated time for strategic reflection. There is a recognition of the physical and emotional burden of the work with ringfenced funding for pastoral support for teams.	Funders have strengthened their capacity for complexity and uncertainty. Ten-year funding cycles are now commonplace with M&E processes that are relational which understand 'value' in a different way.
Support structures	There is a wide range of people to call upon to support and advise the centre, offering technical expertise and specialist skills in key areas like building maintenance. This is supported by a cohesive network of community centres that share resources and learning and help to influence.	Statutory, institutional and private partners target their expertise and support strategically to provide targeted guidance.
Diversified income streams	**Funding is consistent because of mixed income streams.**	Including dedicated funding programmes and strategic partnerships with statutory bodies, local and national government; independent funders and the private sector; unrestricted income from strategic hiring of spaces aligned with purpose.

FROM 2025 TO 2040

For community centres to be able to realise their potential they need to be recognised by all partners as a core part of the essential infrastructure of a place, creating inherently preventative spaces that provide a universal offer which is targeted, relevant and responsive to the community they are in.

The enabling factors for the community centre of 2040 describe a shift in mindset and behaviours from their key partners. Here we set out six recommendations for where action is needed to realise the 2040 vision.

The community centre of 2040 – from vision to reality.

Community centres should be recognised as key strategic and delivery partners with deep knowledge of their communities

- National policymakers should recognise and support the role of community centres in local regeneration, particularly as part of the next wave of neighbourhood-focused initiatives such as the Plan for Neighbourhoods.

- Building on the English Devolution White Paper, national policymakers should recognise the role of the neighbourhood as a core unit for change in relation to thriving communities with community centres integrated into the English devolution agenda.

- Community centres should be factored in as vital social infrastructure within the government's plans for new towns, urban extensions and sustainable place making more broadly.

- The Department of Health and Social Care and the NHS should strategically signal the importance of community centres as part of the NHS 10-year plan and the ambitions to shift towards a neighbourhood health service.

- Local government should recognise and champion community centres as important partners in identifying and working to address key strategic local priorities.

National policymakers should develop a stronger understanding of community centres as a sector, the sector's collective needs and its impact.

Progress towards this could be achieved through:

- A baseline state of the sector review to identify the number of community centres in the UK, the different ownership and management models and the number of staff and volunteers in the sector.

- Ensuring community centres are identified as a key civil society stakeholder across government and that this is reinforced in the forthcoming Civil Society Covenant.

New, long-term funding should be invested in community centres drawn from across the public, private and philanthropic sectors

- An independently administered, pooled fund should be created with resources drawn from a range of sources including funders; philanthropists; dormant assets and blended finance from the social investment sector. This would be for both current and future projects and should include revenue and capital support for at least 10-year funding cycles with funding for capacity building, networking and peer support as core components.

- Funding, including for maintenance of current centres and creation of new, high-quality centres should be prioritised in areas that have received less funding and support in the past and would benefit most from increased social capital.

Partners working in place should identify their role in ensuring the financial sustainability of community centres

- Funders should provide core, multi-year funding allowing for consistency and security.

- Local authorities should continue to invest in community centres as part of their wider approach to prevention and see their role as stewards to all community centres in their locality, supporting them to understand and access funding opportunities that exist and ensure they are included in wider place-based funding bids.

- Housing associations should continue to support community centres in their care, understanding the important role they play in residents' and communities' lives and prioritise them within operational and strategic planning.

Communities should be better supported to take ownership of local assets

- Local authorities should ensure there is a Community Asset Transfer policy in place and consider how they can work as effective partners with communities through and beyond the transfer process to ensure new ownership is set up for long-term success.
- Funders should provide more support to local organisations and networks who are pioneering new approaches to community asset development.
- Government to commit to the plans laid out in the English Devolution White Paper to create a stronger pathway to community asset ownership by replacing the community 'Right to Bid' with a strengthened 'Right to Buy' Assets of Community Value and provide communities with access to the capital needed to take up this right through a Community Wealth Fund.

Attention should be paid to how to better capture the difference that community centres make – reframing the narrative around value

- All partners should continue to explore how to move away from a reliance on metrics to a more long-term, adaptable, holistic evaluation approach that understands community centres' universal and inherently preventative offer and the role they play as part of the ecosystem of their place.

CONCLUSION

Community centres are a core and enduring part of the UK's social infrastructure. They are hubs of social connection, stewards of health and wellbeing, vital partners in their local ecosystems and important physical assets that communities can depend on.

This report sets out what can be achieved if we celebrate, sustain and reimagine community centres for the future. It makes the case for meaningful investment, effort and focus at both the national and local level to dismantle the challenges standing in their way. It calls for their true value to be recognised and nurtured.

Communities thrive when people have spaces to gather, collaborate and share experiences. The loss of these spaces is unravelling our social fabric, weakening the strength of community. From health and wellbeing to community cohesion, the consequences are deep and widespread. Now is the time to restore and protect community centres as spaces that tie our communities together.

APPENDIX 1: THE VISION-SETTERS

Shenley Court Hall, Birmingham

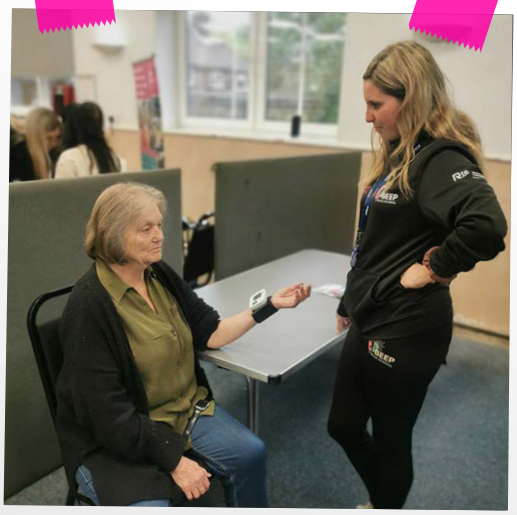
Shenley Court Hall (SCH) is a purpose-built community centre in Birmingham managed by the Bournville Village Trust (BVT), a charity and social housing provider set up by George Cadbury in 1900. SCH has a dedicated team of four including Joanne Deakin, the Centre Coordinator, and is supported by a bigger BVT team that includes Elaine Li, the Community Development and Involvement Manager. Both Elaine and Joanne were a key part of the SCH workshop. The Centre is open from 9am - 5pm every weekday and available to the community at the weekend. Around 370 people use the centre every week, taking part in a range of activities including a lunch club, learning and employment workshops, Shenley Seniors and cadets. They work with partners including statutory services, local businesses, schools and colleges as well as other local community organisations.

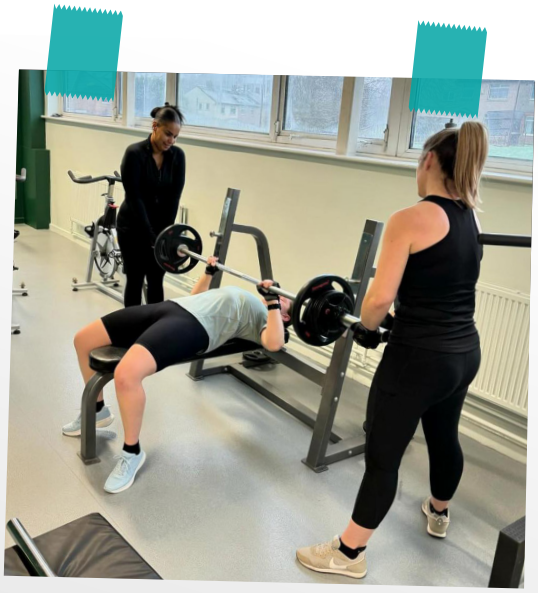
Trinity Rooms Community Hub, Stroud

Trinity Rooms Community Hub in Stroud, Gloucestershire was originally a church hall, dating from 1870. Around 1,000 people use the hub a month and it's open from 9am – midnight (depending on bookings), seven days a week. There are over 60 volunteers and six part-time staff at Trinity Rooms including Josie Cowgill who is the Hub Manager and one of the core vision setters involved in the research. The hub runs fitness sessions, arts and crafts workshops, a community cafe, repair cafe and a mental health cafe and is part of the Network of Stroud Hubs (NosH). The charity is currently leasing Trinity Rooms from the church and is actively fundraising for the £200,000 needed to buy the property. This would provide long-term security and allow them to adapt the space to better suit the community including creating a dedicated food hub, accessible entrances and green energy systems.

The Sutton Centre, Bradford

The Sutton Centre in Bradford was originally built as part of the Holme Wood Housing Estate in the mid 1950s and was owned and run by residents. The building is currently offered as a tenancy at will from Clarion Housing but the charity that runs the space will be moving to a lease agreement over the next year. The Sutton Centre has seven staff and 15 volunteers with 600 people using the space weekly. Sam Kirkby, Centre Manager, was a key contributor to the vision. They are open every day of the week offering a food pantry, support for families, welfare advice, wellbeing and physical health activities. They work with a range of partners including the NHS, Equality Together, Bradford South Family Hub and Clarion.





APPENDIX 2 : VERSIONS OF THE FUTURE – 2040

The vision set out in this report is not intended to be a one-size-fits-all. What the future holds for a community centre will vary from place to place, depending on local assets, resources and priorities. We have developed three fictional versions of the future based on the strengths and aspirations of community centres that exist today. Each one is set in a different geography and responds to the unique needs of its place.

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Inner-City Community Centre: 2040

The centre is based in a heritage building from 1903 and is run by a charity that has been established for 25 years. They are based in an area where 85% of households are deprived in one or more dimensions, where 50% of residents live with a disability and 40% are not in employment and have never been employed. 45% are school children or full-time students. There are nine members of staff and twenty volunteers with over 1,000 people attending the centre weekly. The centre is open 8am – 10pm, Monday – Sunday and offers life skills classes, tech support, a foodbank, family support and music. They also co-host two local grassroots organisations and are part of a coordinated network of local community spaces.

There are babies, toddlers, schoolchildren, students, parents, grandparents, people who work, people who don't, people who can't, people who live here some of the time, people who live here all of the time. There are people who are retired from work. There are shift-workers, part-time workers, people in the gig economy. Hundreds of people come through the centre's doors and they know each one by name. The centre is based out of a 150-year-old heritage building. A lot of time has been spent working out how to make an old space fit for modern use. Small things make a big difference like moveable seats so people can sit where they like; room dividers if people want to change up the shape; blinds on the windows. There are a lot of people with mental health needs in the community and the team has worked hard to make sure their spaces feel safe for people who are neurodivergent; who are struggling with anxiety; who have other needs – things like quiet spaces and dimmable lights.

Before there were about three launderettes in the area but they have all gone so they've opened a laundry at the centre with washing machines and tumble dryers. These are free although people can give a donation if they want. Their Library of Things is thriving. Lots of people there are living in small flats or in shared spaces or living with extended families and don't have storage space. A big part of what the centre offers is a place where people come together to organise and make change, building community power. This is mostly down to providing free, accessible space and the expertise of the volunteers and staff in capacity building – supporting people to navigate the system. They also have tech that people can use to help tap into the benefits of digital innovations and AI. Partnership and collaboration is integral to what they do. There's a lot happening in this neighbourhood with a mix of informal and formal activity taking place. The centre is part of a bigger network of purpose-driven community spaces and other partners. They work together reciprocally and collaboratively, sharing resources, knowledge and expertise.

What's amazing about all of the people who contribute to the centre is how representative they are of the community, which is really diverse. Between them they bring the languages, food, music, skills and customs that speak to that place.

Rural Community Centre: 2040

The centre has been running since 1976 in a purpose-built space. It has 3 members of staff and 50 volunteers, with 400 people a week coming to the centre every week. It works closely with the local authority, community transport network, the NHS and the community shop. They run a repair café, gardening, fitness activities and café. 60% of households are deprived in one or more dimensions, where 40% of residents live with a disability and 45% are not in employment and have never worked. 60% are school children or full-time students. 10% are school children or full-time students.

The community centre has had a bit of a double whammy. There are less people who live in the area now than 15 years ago and those who do are getting older. It can be quite a lonely place, especially in the winter. The centre is really at the heart of the place. There's a pub, a community shop and a park nearby but the community centre is the only space people can gather. It's a place where people choose to mark their births and birthdays; anniversaries and funerals. For some people, the centre is the difference between living and just existing.

The centre is served by a bus route and it has worked in partnership with the local authority and bus companies to keep that route running and consistent. For lots of people who visit that is the only way they can get there from neighbouring villages. There is also an amazing community transport network, run by volunteers, who help take people to and from. They've got a lot of green space around them but they don't own it. Again, the team's strong relationship with the local authority means that they've been able to work together to create a safe crossing from the centre to the park where they've also created a space to have a

gardening club. This is run by volunteers and people can access it whenever they want to grow vegetables and fruit. They've also set up a repair shop. They have a pop-up café for people to have tea and cake whilst things are repaired. The pub supports with this, providing soft drinks, and the community shop donates cake and biscuits.

The NHS physiotherapist is located at the centre once a week and there are other visiting health services that rotate between there and other neighbouring centres on a monthly basis. The centre is now part of the local authority's strategic disaster plan and the team has built up the resources needed to support the community if a crisis hits. They have space to store bottled water, tinned foods, medical provisions, hygiene items and blankets. They can even provide temporary accommodation if it comes to it.

There is a community centre manager who is full-time and about 50 volunteers, including a very committed Trustee Board. This allows for their leadership to be distributed, not reliant on one or a few very passionate and committed people.

Semi-Urban Community Centre: 2040

The centre is brand new and was built as part of the Estate. It also houses health partners in the same building. It's open 10am – 7pm Monday – Sunday with 4 members of staff and fifty volunteers. 500 people attend weekly and they have a café, food store, gardening activities, digital skills, adult education and physical fitness. 70% of residents are deprived in one or more dimensions with 20% of residents living with a disability and 35% not in employment and have never worked.

First things first - you can see into their space from the outside so you know what's going on before you step through the door. The centre is fully accessible and everyone can move around with ease. There are small rooms where people can meet and large spaces for people to gather. This allows the centre to run activities concurrently which means that people get lots of opportunities to cross each other's paths.

The centre generates its own energy through solar panels and ground and air source heat pumps. There are electric charging points and an electric vehicle that is used to help distribute resources and bring supplies in. They're a key partner of the community energy plan and have planted trees to cool their space and worked with partners to provide street trees around them. They've started a café and they also have a food store. Food is central: growing, cooking, eating, distributing. They are adamant that no-one in the community will go hungry.

One of the things that the team came across when they were doing the co-design process with the community was access to nature. This was combined with their research on mental and physical health challenges in the community. This led to the creation of a sensory garden which has a mix of seating areas, herb planters, lots of calm colours and lighting. This was a particular concern for the community as they wanted to be outside but also feel safe in the evenings.

People were also worried about the lack of stuff to do in the immediate area. They're on the edge of town so it's either a good walk or a bus journey to shops and other things like the library. The centre has been built with the health centre incorporated so they have essential services onsite as well as a chemist. Adult social care and children's services are co-located in the building. This set-up offers reciprocal benefits to the community – they get the vaccinations, healthcare, advice, guidance, signposting and support they need, and those services that are furthest away from people tap into the centre's ability to reach them.

Whenever someone new moves into the town it won't be long before they're taken into the community centre. It's somewhere people are proud of – the joy and the little things that better lives are made of.

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THE RAYNE TRUST

The Rayne Trust is an independent grant-making charity which aims to build bridges between communities and to act as a catalyst in supporting new ideas or ways of working.

The Trust works to develop and increase tolerance and understanding between communities and people of different backgrounds, to help bring people in from the margins of society and to bring people and organisations together to benefit society.

To find out more, visit www.raynefoundation.org.uk

The Rayne Trust

Community centres have long stood as pillars of local life, as places where people can meet, mix and connect; where care, fun and friendships bloom and problems are shared. But we are losing these spaces at pace and at scale.

The impact of this loss is tangible in our everyday lives. Areas where there are no places to meet face poorer social and economic outcomes, including higher rates of ill health and child poverty.

Felt most strongly in our most economically deprived communities, this is compounding the challenges of entrenched disadvantage and regional inequality. But this is only part of the story. Against the odds, community centres remain woven into the fabric of place, improving people's quality of life in critical ways. There is now growing recognition of the need to restore the spaces that tie our communities together, to do so urgently and for the long term.

Supported by:

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