

# No Place Left Behind



The Commission into  
Prosperity and Community  
Placemaking



## Commissioners



**Toby Lloyd** is the Chair of the Commission. He was Shelter's Head of Policy for seven years, and was the Prime Minister's Special Adviser on housing and local government 2018-19.



**Vidhya Alakeson** is the founding Chief Executive of Power to Change, an independent trust established in 2015 to support the growth of community businesses across England.



**Dave Boyle** is a consultant specialising in helping community groups raise patient equity capital and has worked with over 50 groups, helping them raise £13M.



**Nicholas Boys Smith** is founding Director of Create Streets, a think tank and consultancy leading or supporting many urban design and community co-design projects.



**Stephen Brien** is Director of Policy at the Legatum Institute, a thinktank researching the pathways to lifting all people out of poverty.



**Nicky Chance-Thompson** is CEO of the Piece Hall in Halifax.



**Kathryn Eames** has 15 years' experience working in local government in regeneration and development, with particular expertise in community engagement.



**Miatta Fahnbulleh** is Chief Executive of the New Economics Foundation. She has a wealth of experience in developing and delivering policy to empower communities.



**Paul Fiddaman** is Chief Executive of Karbon Homes.



**Caroline Gore-Booth** is Project Manager at Giroscope, a self-help housing project based in Hull.



**Matt Leach** is the CEO of place-based funder Local Trust.



**Jennifer McKevitt** is Chief Executive of Back on the Map, a community business with £4.7M of residential, commercial and land assets in Hendon, Sunderland.



**Melissa Mean** is Director of We Can Make at Knowle West Media Centre in Bristol, focused on developing new kinds of citizen-led housing.



**Rachael Orr** is the Director of PlaceShapers, the network for more than 100 community-based social landlords.



**Mary Parsons** is Chair of the Town; Country Planning Association and Regeneration and Partnerships Director at Lovell Partnerships.



**Andy Reeve** is Director of Regenerative Economics at Civic Square, a research lab focusing on building and investing in civic infrastructure.



**Andre Reid** is the founder of Kiondo, a design research studio aiding developers, local authorities and social organisations to design with communities.



**Gareth Swarbrick** is Chief Executive of Rochdale Boroughwide Housing. He led the transformation of RBH from local authority owned ALMO into the UK's first tenant and employee owned mutual social landlord.

The production of this report has been a collective effort and where possible reflects the broad consensus of the Commissioners. However not every Commissioner agrees with every single word or proposal.

## Project team



**Rose Grayston** is Senior Programme Manager for Housing at the New Economics Foundation, and has 10 years of experience in providing research, policy and communications services to progressive campaigns and their leaders.



**Catherine Harrington** is the former founder and CEO of the National CLT Network and has over 17 years experience in advocacy campaigning and housing and regeneration policy and practice.



**Lauren Lawson** is Project Manager and Urban Designer at Create Streets Foundation. She works with neighbourhood groups across the UK to help enable them to create positive place-based change.

We would also like to thank the following for their support and contributions to the research:

**Maddalena Iovene, Robert Kwolek, David Milner, Constance de Montigny, Lydia Ogden, George Payiatis, Hugo Owen** and **John Spence** at Create Streets  
**Ailbhe McNabola, Jenny Sansom** and **Rose Seagrief** at Power to Change  
**Margaret Bolton, Georgie Burr, Dan Crowe** and **Rayhan Haque** at Local Trust  
**Andy Coulthard** at Livin and **Alex Chapman** at NEF'



# Executive Summary

## Levelling up our left behind places

England has been scarred by geographic imbalances for far too long. As we explore in chapter 1, 'left behind places' are not just products of economic decline or income inequality. The sorry fact that far too many places feel left behind is also a legacy of post-war urban design, poor planning, centralised decision-making and under-investment in the social infrastructure that is so vital to local communities. To replace spirals of neighbourhood decline with a virtuous circle of wellbeing and prosperity, we have to invest in the physical fabric of local places and the social fabric of local communities – and trust communities themselves to lead it.

We welcome the government's commitment to levelling up, but top-down investment must not focus on expensive heavy infrastructure rather than in catalysing bottom-up improvements to local places. We are convinced that neighbourhoods should normally come first and that government funding should be more about empowering than imposing.

## Connecting our communities, greening our towns and taking back our streets

### Places matter. Many need to go on a road diet.

Lockdown has shown us all the value of green and pleasant places, but too many of our cities, towns and villages suffer from fast, noisy roads, run down public spaces, unreliable public transport and decaying buildings. We need to reconnect communities, liberate movement, and replace dual carriageways with tree-lined boulevards, tramlines and green space. Parks, not car parks, are an essential ingredient of social and economic success, yet 8.7 million people live more than ten minutes walk from a local park, including more than 250,000 in the most left behind wards in the country.

### Left behind places need trees, trams and tricycles to create prosperous, child-friendly environments.

In chapter 2 we explore ways to improve the lived experience of left behind places. We call for a revolution in place quality and local transport connectivity, with better bus services and new trams connecting towns, suburbs and villages, and the legalisation of e-scooters.

## Thriving places need hubs, hearts and high streets

**Town and neighbourhood centres matter.** They are vital for prosperous community life and the identity of places; but many town centres have been hit hard by economic change, the decline of mid-twentieth century retail and the impacts of covid. The future of the traditional high street is on a knife edge: it must reinvent itself or face terminal decline.

**Left behind towns need the tools to remake the high street.** We devote chapter 3 to interventions aimed at reinventing town centres to be thriving hubs of community, cultural and commercial life. We call for urgent support for the independent businesses that give places their distinctive character; a revolving asset fund to transition vacant commercial property into beneficial uses quickly, and smarter planning policies aimed at diversifying high streets, to be delivered using a new model of locally-accountable Community Improvement Districts.

### Giving communities the Right to Buy and the power to regenerate their towns

**Social infrastructure matters. Who owns it – and who decides – matters.** People in left behind places report that what their areas need most are places for people to meet. The loss of social facilities like community centres, libraries and pubs is keenly felt, and when the college or the last health centre close it can be a potent symbol and

driver of decline. Where neither the market nor the state seem able to provide these essential assets, communities have started to do so themselves. But too often the incentives of public authorities and private property owners are not aligned with communities' interests, leaving property empty and heritage buildings neglected.

**Left behind communities need the powers and resources to take control of their assets.** In chapter 4 we show the economic value of community regeneration and identify levelling up as a unique opportunity to scale up community ownership. We call for the government to complete the task begun with the Localism Act of 2011 and create a Community Right to Buy, matched with real resources. To tackle the 'farming of dereliction' we call for the proposed Right to Regenerate to enable communities to acquire empty property at a fair value.

## Neighbourhoods first: renewing homes place by place

**Homes and neighbourhoods matter.** Many left behind places are marked by aging and poor-quality housing stock. The challenge of retrofitting the nation's homes to the net zero carbon standard by 2050 is most daunting in these places, where values are low and owners have little incentive or ability to invest in improvements.

**Left behind neighbourhoods need street-by-street investment to bring homes up to standard.** In chapter 5 we call for Neighbourhood Improvement Districts: an ambitious programme of area-wide home retrofitting that can raise the overall value of left behind places and recoup the initial investment. We call for the social housing decarbonisation fund to be brought forward, to kickstart the supply chains needed to retrofit the nation's homes. We highlight the success of housing association and community-led regeneration projects and call for more support for these approaches.

## Institutions and investment are the building blocks of local transformation

**Resources and the ecosystem of local institutions matter.** Successful places benefit from a rich infrastructure of public, private and community organisations. In chapter 6 we explore how investment can be better deployed to develop the local ecosystems that can catalyse sustained regeneration

**Levelling up the country needs government to trust communities with flexible, long-term funding.** While we welcome the resources committed already, we call on government to replace short-term, competitive funding pots run from Whitehall with longer-term, needs-based funding that will give local government and communities the confidence to embark on bold regeneration plans.

Extraordinary times demand extraordinary responses. The pandemic, the climate emergency and near-zero interest rates are sufficiently unique to justify a one-off transfer of local government debt onto the national balance sheet, liberating councils to invest in their places, economies and communities. We also call for a £2bn Community Wealth Fund, to build on Big Local's success in supporting the most left behind places develop their own solutions.

This report is the product of a year of evidence gathering and discussion with experts and grassroots community activists from around the country. We hope it can contribute towards a deeper understanding of what levelling up our left behind places should mean, and how to achieve it, so that no place is left behind.

# Policy proposals

## Chapter 2: The Importance of Place

### 1. Put urban areas on a street diet and create safer streets

- Policy proposal i: repurpose the existing roads budget to include reducing or removing urban motorways and dual carriageways, to create boulevards, linear parks and public spaces
- Policy proposal ii: make a 20 mph speed limit the standard for urban areas
- Policy proposal iii: update highways policy to create better, safer streets
- Policy proposal iv: include health, pollution and wellbeing indicators in the KPIs of council chief executives, highways, planning, and housing teams

### 2. Plant trees and clean the air

- Policy proposal v: extend and simplify the Urban Tree Challenge Fund to increase canopy cover by 10 per cent by 2025
- Policy proposal vi: ensure levelling up programmes and funds include support for micro interventions with appropriately minimal bureaucratic requirements
- Policy proposal vii: provide and steward high quality parks and green spaces

### 3. Connect communities

- Policy proposal viii: replace out-dated 'predict and provide' transport planning models with those that support better place making and sustainable mobility throughout planning, development and regeneration processes

- Policy proposal ix: commit to providing light rapid transit systems for all cities and larger towns in England
- Policy proposal x: review the regulations on utilities and HMT rules on procurement to significantly lower the costs of new tram systems
- Policy proposal xi: prioritise R&D and transport innovation funding on relatively low tech transport systems for connecting towns and suburbs
- Policy proposal xii: commit to delivering a comprehensive national bus network, connecting every neighbourhood with regular and reliable services, at a flat £1 fare
- Policy proposal xiii: ensure levelling up funds are sufficiently flexible to allow proper integration of investment in street improvements, transport facilities and wider regeneration

### 4. Liberate movement

- Policy proposal xiv: fulfil the Prime Minister's promises to launch Active Travel England by the end of 2021, and give it the full £5bn budget required to meet the objectives of the government's Gear Change strategy.
- Policy proposal xv: legalise the use of private e-scooters on public roads.
- Policy proposal xvi: deliver on the promise to establish a national e-bike support programme of 'loans, subsidies or other financial incentives'
- Policy proposal xvii: offer freedom passes to jobseekers in all areas eligible for levelling up funding.

## Chapter 3: Recreating town and neighbourhood centres

### 1. Revive town centre commerce and activity beyond the pandemic by supporting independent stores and rescuing lost assets

- Policy proposal i: convert Bounce Back Loans to independent high street businesses to grants
- Policy proposal ii: create a town centre asset rescue fund
- Policy proposal iii: reform and simplify business rates

### 2. Support the community high street by creating Community Improvement Districts and public sector co-location

- Policy proposal iv: create Community Improvement Districts for town centres in left behind places
- Policy proposal v: high street renewal should include co-locating public services in community hubs

### 3. Ensure planning, development and property ownership supports regeneration rather than preventing it

- Policy proposal vi: strengthen national planning policy support for 'town centre first' policies, keep the new use classes under review, and allow councils to use Article 4 opt-outs from PDRs as part of comprehensive town centre regeneration plans
- Policy proposal vii: permit place-enhancing changes of use
- Policy proposal viii: ensure leasehold reform does not undermine the viability of mixed use regeneration

## Chapter 4: The value of community regeneration

### 1. Support community asset acquisition

- Policy proposal i: create a genuine Community Right to Buy registered Assets of Community Value, at an independently assessed fair value
- Policy proposal ii: update law and guidance on best consideration to encourage more Community Asset Transfer from public authorities and charities at prices reflecting social value
- Policy proposal iii: expand the Community Ownership Fund to at least £250m and make the criteria for future bidding rounds more flexible
- Policy proposal iv: extend and reform Social Investment Tax Relief to enable much greater use of private capital for community asset acquisition.

### 2. Put community asset ownership of a sustainable footing

- Policy proposal v: allow national funding streams to provide more revenue funding and capacity support for local and community projects
- Policy proposal vi: create a public register of community assets to support their legal protection
- Policy proposal vii: encourage more collaboration between property owners and community organisations

### 3. Empower communities to tackle dereliction and neglectful ownership

- Policy proposal viii: deliver on commitments to full transparency of property ownership

# Policy proposals

- Policy proposal ix: extend the proposed Right to Regenerate to allow councils to require improvement to eyesore buildings and tackle speculative dereliction, and give communities the right of first refusal to acquire derelict public land and buildings
- Policy proposal x: reform compulsory purchase law to enable more strategic plan-making and land acquisition in and around towns, and to prevent speculative pressures from undermining regeneration

## Chapter 5: Renewing homes and neighbourhoods

### 1. Kickstart decarbonisation of the nation's homes by retrofitting the social housing stock

- Policy proposal i: launch the £3.8bn Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund immediately
- Policy proposal ii: grant greater flexibility in the use of the Recycled Capital Grant Fund for retrofitting works

### 2. Launch a national programme of neighbourhood retrofitting in parallel with social housing decarbonisation

- Policy proposal iii: reshape the next phase of the ECO scheme to support area-wide retrofits for owner occupied housing, alongside social housing retrofitting plans and focusing on left behind places first
- Policy proposal iv: cut VAT to zero on both the labour and materials elements of core improvements to existing homes, in line with the treatment of new build development
- Policy proposal v: reboot Homes England to be a driving force for regenerating left behind neighbourhoods and decarbonising the housing stock

### 3. Create Neighbourhood Improvement Districts to secure area-wide housing improvements across all tenures

- Policy proposal vi: create Neighbourhood Improvement Districts, analogous to Community Improvement Districts, for residential areas requiring major retrofitting and improvement works
- Policy proposal vii: reduce the Local Housing Allowance payable on substandard private rented stock in Neighbourhood Improvement Districts.

### 4. Fund the building and transfer of homes into long-term, non-profit ownership in failing housing markets

- Policy proposal viii: fund a £1.3bn National Housing Conversion Fund to support transfer of properties in the lowest value housing markets to long-term, not-for-profit owners which commit to retrofit them to meet Government targets, prioritised on Neighbourhood Improvement Districts.
- Policy proposal ix: renew the successful Community Housing Fund
- Policy proposal x: expand support for private social investment in left behind neighbourhoods, by providing match funding on a first loss basis for social investment in retrofitting funds.

## Chapter 6: Institutions and investment

### 1. Put local government finances on a sustainable footing

- Policy proposal i: free local government from the debt burden holding back its investment
- Policy proposal ii: guarantee local authorities in left behind places ten years of core revenue funding certainty

### 2. Empower local authorities to be effective community partners

- Policy proposal iii: require local authorities to have community asset transfer policies and champions
- Policy proposal iv: establish clear methodologies for appraising social value for public asset disposals
- Policy proposal v: allow local authorities to on-lend to their local community sectors

### 3. Rebuild the ecosystem with funding for what works

- Policy proposal vi: create a Community Wealth Fund worth at least £2bn as an independent endowment for the UK's left behind neighbourhoods.
- Policy proposal vii: replace short term, competitive funding pots, with more certain, needs-based funding streams for levelling up
- Policy proposal viii: recognise the added value of anchor institutions in planning and funding regimes
- Policy proposal ix: introduce new procurement and commissioning rules to explicitly prioritise social value over the whole of government accounts and ensure a greater role for social enterprises and community groups in public service delivery.
- Policy proposal x: increase the availability of government data at Lower Super Output Area level to support more place-sensitive policy and investment.



