The impact of community assets in 2026

Published: 31st March 2026

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Location(s): England & Wales , Northern Ireland , Scotland

Topics: Culture & Communities, Resources

'Third Places' as community assets

Community assets are collective resources such as the skills and knowledge of residents, networks and connections within a community, local charity or voluntary organisations, physical infrastructure, and economic resources. 'Third Places', a term coined by Ray Oldenburg, refers to places other than home ('first' place) and work ('second' place); further identified by the characteristics of inclusivity, accessibility, and being a neutral ground with the ability to enter and leave without restriction. Third Places are found to strengthen social connections and community through social levelling, bridging social capital, and psychological support with social conversations and being around others. Third places are recognised as an "essential component of an area's *social infrastructure*", and are a key example of community assets due to the physical space and opportunity for social connection and sharing of knowledge. We have seen the disintegration of third places in part due to economic pressures and increased digital opportunities for social connections.

Through community and social support, third places have a positive impact on health, well-being, and social care within an area. These spaces encourage physical activity, social interaction, and socioeconomic support, resulting in potential positive implications for physical and mental health within a community. Increased access to information, trust building, and community resilience are identified as consequences of the social infrastructure that these spaces can support. Community resilience is linked to the activation of local assets that help communities handle emergency circumstances, including physical, climate, social, and economic events. Community engagement is cited by Hope not Hate as a "useful tool for tackling hate and building up community resilience". They emphasise the role of local people as a resource to establish a positive and resilient community, and the importance of community members' agency to shape change as a defence against political agitation.

Local governments attempt to use community assets to strengthen community engagement, resilience, and local infrastructure. Asset-based community development is an approach to address local issues by moving away from a deficit approach, focused on weaknesses, to an asset-based approach, focused on opportunities for change using community assets. This approach is tailored for each place as is determined by the resources within an area and the specific goals prioritised by the community. However, they share the foundational characteristics of creating and utilising local partnerships between local authority, voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector, local organisations, and residents. Other core aspects of this approach include community builders (a person within a trusted organisation operating at a neighbourhood level), community connectors (local people encouraged to share skills and knowledge), asset mapping (identifying local assets), and small sparks funding (grants awarded to community projects). This approach is intended to make change that is important to communities by using and sharing their skills and resources; however, there are potential limitations to this approach, including a lack of addressing structural and systemic causes of inequalities and the displacement of responsibility of issues onto communities.

Programmes & case studies

National government programmes can support the development of community assets by local governments. Pride in Place is a government strategy that delivers up to £20m over 10 years to selected neighbourhoods across the UK, where implementation decisions are made by a neighbourhood board consisting of residents, local business and community organisations. It is underpinned by the objectives of building stronger communities, creating thriving places, and empowering people to have control over the future of their community. This programme recognises the significance of community engagement and the strength in increasing health, education, innovation and growth. It highlights social trust as a key aspect of social capital, linking this to productivity and income in neighbourhoods. While initially funding 75 places across the UK, the programme was extended in September 2025 to include an additional £20m of funding over ten years for 169 neighbourhoods identified as most-in-need and "doubly disadvantaged" by deprivation levels and weak social infrastructure. In February 2026, a plan to add an additional 40 neighbourhoods to the programme was announced.

One of the first 75 towns included in the Pride in Place programme, Barnsley, outline their goals of using the £19.5m funding as an opportunity to strengthen the community through funding enrichment activities, youth infrastructure, and inclusive spaces. By 2030, they are intending to increase learning, growth, health and sustainability; and have goals of increased green and vibrant space, and an empowered community by 2040. The town board asserts that their proposed programme will align with existing goals across the town and will amplify ongoing initiatives while creating new opportunities for growth and community empowerment. Base 71 Youth Zone is a project underpinned by their strategy, creating a third place for young people with the potential of building skills and connections. The Maurice Dobson Museum and Heritage Centre, located in Darfield, Barnsley, used a grant from the funding to improve social spaces and increase capacity for visitors and community activities. The volunteer-run museum provides tailored resources for educational visits, hosts intergenerational events such as poetry workshops and art demonstrations, and showcases the history of local LGBTQIA+ advocacy.

The Pride in Place Impact Fund provides an additional £150m funding to ninety-five places for immediate support and the development of community spaces and facilities, public spaces and high streets. Enfield Council was awarded £1.5m through the Pride in

Place Impact fund, intended to be used to support shared spaces and community-led projects. The council has allocated £400,000 of this investment to the Pride of Enfield fund, where local organisations, charities and community members are able to apply for grant support focused on community spaces, public spaces, high streets, and sustainability.

Within the Pride in Place programme, the Common Ground Resilience Fund works to support local places through funding organisations in the VCSE sector, aiming to promote social cohesion and community resilience. Wolverhampton Council, a recipient of the grant, cites the objectives of reducing divisions, building resilience against community tensions, and supporting local people and organisations in the community through investments in shared spaces and activities.

Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is a charge levied by local authorities on new development to be used on supporting local development and infrastructure, such as transport, flood defences, health and social care facilities, open spaces, parks and green spaces, cultural and sports facilities- providing flexibility to fund needed infrastructure identified by the community. Brighton and Hove introduced their CIL in 2020, taking the funds paid by developers when building in the city towards citywide projects. In November 2025, the Better Brighton & Hove fund was announced as a percentage of the CIL allocated for the neighbourhoods where the money was raised from developers. This provides nearly £750,000 to be used for projects across neighbourhoods, and residents were invited to provide ideas of how the money should be spent.

Implications for the local government sector

Programmes and policies that use and develop community assets have key implications for local government in their role of implementing the programmes as well as the resulting increased strength of community assets. These programmes are designed to support areas by utilising and developing local strengths and resources. Successful community-led projects align with the local area's goals and establish long-term support of community strengths, with trusted representatives from the area having a significant role in transparent and accountable planning. The funding and development of physical resources, such as 'third places', and non-physical assets can increase community building, engagement, and quality of life. An improved social infrastructure supports community resilience, which increases the local government's ability to support a community through turbulent events. The increased representation of community members in decision-making, such as through neighbourhood boards, can result in an increased trust in local authority and allow local governments to enhance their partnerships with constituents. Local partnerships between local organisations and local government in community asset projects increase the responsibility of local government in implementing, utilising, and overseeing the programmes. If the success of these programmes strengthens social infrastructure, this can provide a stronger foundation of community assets to build future programmes on.

Limitations

There are key limitations to programmes that utilise community assets. In order to support significant and long-term change, the structural and systemic causes of inequalities must be addressed through the programmes or simultaneously. Community asset programmes require funding, and can gain support from national or local governments to supplement support from other organisations such as charities. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation highlighted some limitations of the Pride in Place programme, including funding gaps and timeline constraints. They found that 21% of the doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods that they had identified across England were granted Pride in Place phase 2 funding, and an additional 16% of these neighbourhoods were associated with towns that received phase 1 Pride in Place funding. They note an unequal distribution of funding across regions, further illustrating the "critical funding gap" for many doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This funding requires local areas to do significant community engagement work in a short timeline, which the Joseph Rowntree Foundation asserts is more difficult to achieve in areas with weaker social infrastructure. The community members who are involved in decision-making throughout these programmes must accurately represent the community in order to effectively align the programme and the community's priorities, and should protect against the risk of the displacement of communities throughout development. While the increased responsibility for local government increases their potential for impact, it requires local authorities to have the capacity to oversee community projects long term and risks the displacement of responsibility of issues onto communities.

Conclusion

Ultimately, 'Third Places' can have significant impacts on community engagement, resilience, health, and quality of life. With support from government programmes, local authorities can support the creation and improvement of these spaces and other assets for the goal of community wellbeing and a prioritisation of community-led change. It is important to recognise the significant limitations of these approaches to change if not combined with structural and systemic change.