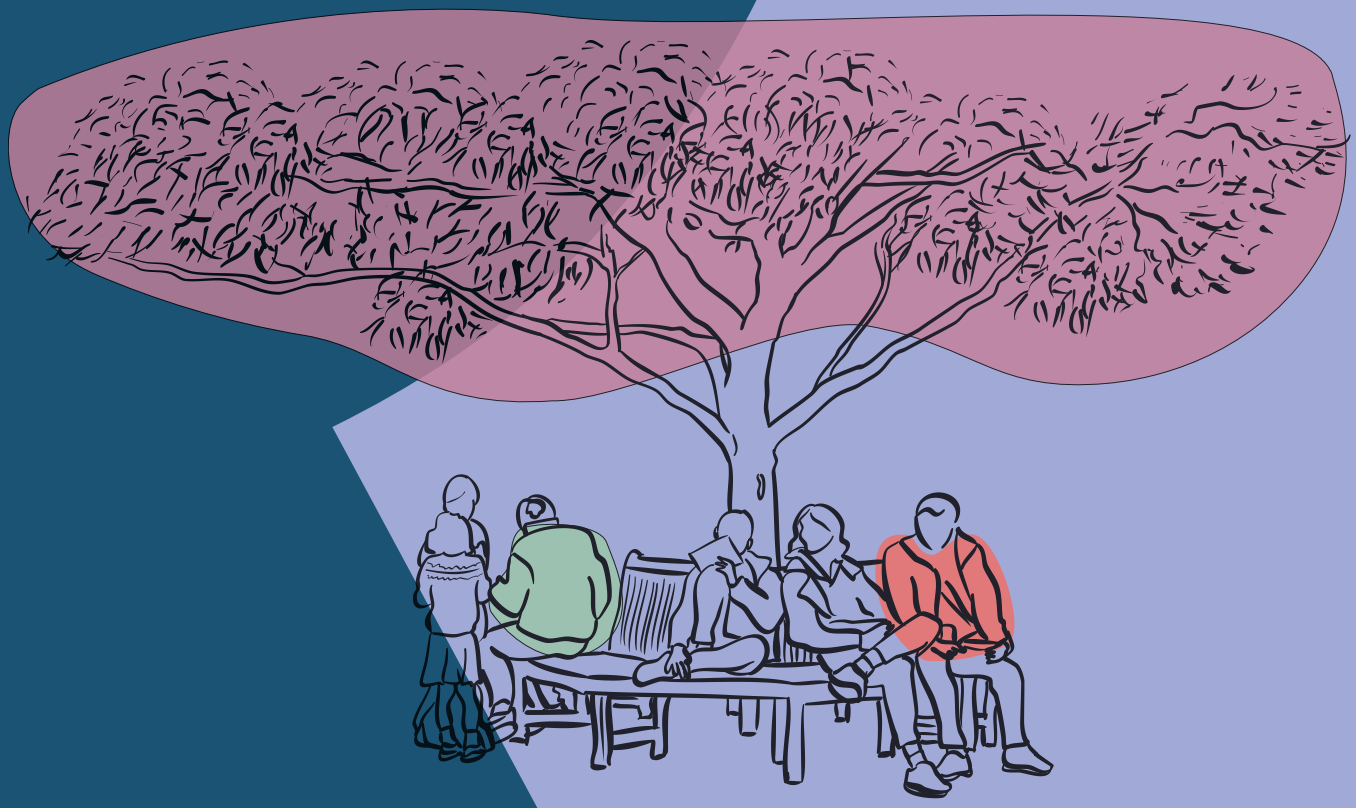
IPPR

A Decade of
National Renewal

PLACES TO COME TOGETHER

REBUILDING LOCAL SOLIDARITIES AGAINST THE FAR RIGHT

DISCUSSION PAPER



Sacha Hilhorst

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ABOUT THE DECADE OF NATIONAL RENEWAL PROGRAMME

The IPPR Decade of National Renewal Programme is a major initiative to rethink progressive politics in a time of great change and challenge.

We are interpreting the moment we are living through and developing new ideas for progressives to 'own the future'. The programme is bringing together new thinking, and new thinkers, to develop practical but bold and distinctive answers to the big questions of our time.

We will offer a sense of what progressive parties could stand for in the future, not just the recent past. The collapse of conventional ideas makes this a time of great political openness: the future is there for the making.

ABOUT IPPR

IPPR, the Institute for Public Policy Research, is an independent charity working towards a fairer, greener, and more prosperous society. We are researchers, communicators, and policy experts creating tangible progressive change, and turning bold ideas into common sense realities. Working across the UK, IPPR, IPPR North, and IPPR Scotland are deeply connected to the people of our nations and regions, and the issues our communities face.

We have helped shape national conversations and progressive policy change for more than 30 years. From making the early case for the minimum wage and tackling regional inequality, to proposing a windfall tax on energy companies, IPPR's research and policy work has put forward practical solutions for the crises facing society.

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FOREWORD

One of the basic, daunting facts of politics today is the shrinking of our common ground: the public sphere has fragmented and polarised, as our class structure is reworked and the politics of identity comes to the fore, our news consumption diversifies, and the sense of a shared national story – about who we are, and where we are going – retreats.

As IPPR has repeatedly shown, political trust is at crisis point, a disillusionment which deepens the further one gets from London. In straitened economic times, politics feels increasingly zero sum: for one group to gain, another must lose out. As the traditional bonds between mainstream political parties and social constituencies weakens, and politics is convulsed by reactive, unpredictable outpourings from social media, it is the populist radical right which has most benefited. The search for a progressive answer to these challenges is one of the driving concerns behind IPPR's new Decade of National Renewal programme.

In this discussion paper, Sacha Hilhorst traces a crisis of community through a series of long-term processes, in particular deindustrialisation and the marginalisation of local government. In the 2010s, these processes were turbo-charged by the coincidence of the rise of social media, which increasingly fragmented the public sphere, and austerity, which bore down on shared spaces that gave life to local community: libraries, community hubs, Sure Start centres. For many people, the deterioration of high streets has become the most vivid symbol of a wider, national malaise.

As the physical, shared places for people to come together have withered away, so, Hilhorst shows, community activity has been relocated onto digital platforms – and politics is too often relocated to private Telegram channels or WhatsApp groups, where young men in particular are increasingly inducted into the radical right.

There is much recent history of area-based interventions, targeted at restoring the physical and social fabric of deprived communities – from New Labour's New Deal for Communities, through to the Conservatives' levelling up agenda. These enjoyed varying degrees of success, but none grappled sufficiently with the condition of local government or Britain's regionally imbalanced political economy. Today's challenges make such efforts all the more urgent.

This IPPR discussion paper advances a new model, rooted in working-class history and ripe for reinvention in this new, daunting context: a reimagined welfare fund, funded by a levy on the companies whose distribution centres and warehouses have taken the place of the heavy-industrial employers of old, and targeted at creating, maintaining and facilitating the spaces where new social solidarities might thrive.

Nick Garland
Associate fellow, IPPR

A PLACE TO COME TOGETHER

In late July 2024, the seaside town of Southport in Merseyside burst into the national consciousness when it suffered two different, violent events in succession. At around noon on July 29, a violent loner carried out a horrific attack at a holiday dance club, killing three little girls. Amid the confusion and grief, rumours started to spread. Far-right activists from elsewhere directed people to Southport to 'take a stand', where they mixed with a smaller number of locals with various grievances around immigration, political neglect and their struggling coastal economy. The next day, a protest degenerated into rioting and attacks on the local mosque, fueled by islamophobia, racism and misinformation. The riots would soon spread to other cities and towns, but in Southport it was all over in 36 hours.

In the aftermath, many called for a wave of investment in Southport and places like it. Instead, the town has suffered further setbacks (Hamilton 2025a). While the events of July captured the headlines, the fight for investment in local amenities has garnered little attention. The town has been hoping to reopen its historic pier (Hurley 2024), which, like many British piers, has suffered from a lack of maintenance (Chapman, Richards and Blake 2020). It was closed suddenly for health and safety reasons in 2022 and has remained fenced off ever since. For many, the pier represents nostalgia and togetherness. When a group of locals organised a meeting to try and save it, hundreds of people turned up (Hamilton 2025b). Locals miss the joyful space – a place to walk with your kid and grab an ice cream, a remnant of the town's historic splendour. The writer Kojo Koram, reflecting on his childhood there, describes it as a place full of "glass-domed arcades and scenic, botanic gardens [which] remind you that in its Victorian heyday, Southport offered families a temporary escape from a life of toil" (Koram 2024).

If there is a thread connecting the high-octane events of late July and the slow local politics of the pier, it is the loss of physical spaces where we might come together, and the radicalisation of some of the digital spaces that have replaced them. There is an appetite for community action, as the campaign for the pier shows, but a lack of investment and space. In the absence of structures which might foster wider solidarities, many retreat into the sphere of the home or worse, into ethno-nationalist fantasies of muscular sovereignty.[1] An anaemic, increasingly digital public sphere may be limited in its ability to offer sustained organisation, but it has proved capable of fomenting spasmodic eruptions of weaponised whiteness, as the riots demonstrate.

The loss of shared spaces and connecting structures affects our relation to each other and erodes our capacity to mobilise for a cause. These losses can also fuel a sense of decline that narrows the space available for progressive politics. They ultimately hamper solidarity itself, understood as the mutual recognition that our lives are connected and that we might count on each other in our struggles.[2] What is to be done? When funding pressures threaten the most basic state functions, a defence of community venues and public spaces such as the pier, the welfare or the leisure centre can seem frivolous and sentimental. And yet progressive

1 Think, for example, of the Middlesbrough rioters who in the summer of 2024 instituted racist 'checkpoints', blocking the roads and letting through only those who were white and English (N. White, 2024). See also Seymour (2024).

2 A definition loosely adapted from Wendy Brown's In The Ruins of Neoliberalism (Brown 2019).

futures require that we find a way to foster mundane solidarities. We need social infrastructures to facilitate connectedness. The social democratic tradition is not without its resources in this regard, but its tools will have to be reinvented to be fit for our age and the distinctive challenges of our moment.

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE WELFARE

The 19th and 20th centuries saw various attempts to create social democratic lifeworlds, grounded in physical places where people could come together. In the UK's mining towns, the Methodist churches and colliery-based labour unions spawned a dense organisational infrastructure, often in response to practical problems such as wage theft and dangerous working conditions. Pressure from the labour movement generated not only trusted representatives and improved working conditions, but also social spaces, including sports facilities, workers' education, social clubs and miners' welfares. Such places are not just valuable leisure facilities, but also a form of social infrastructure which helps to create and project shared ideas about what the future ought to look like.

This story starts in Southport too. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the trade unions and the Labour Party often held their conferences in the Victorian resort, which was easily reachable for the working-class inhabitants of Liverpool and Manchester. Contemporary accounts in local newspapers sketch the hustle and bustle of tens of thousands of working-class people descending upon the town (Liverpool Mercury 1890). At about five o' clock in the morning ahead of one such meeting, early risers could spot a large flock of pigeons swirling above the town centre. The freshly arrived Cheshire and Lancashire miners counted many in their midst who trained homing pigeons as a hobby. At the crack of dawn, the first arrivals released their pigeons to fly back inland, to their homes, while their owners stayed behind to negotiate proposals for the eight-hour working day (Liverpool Mercury 1890).

One of the most famous conferences to alight in Southport was the Miners' Federation meeting of 1919. In the middle of January, the miners met to discuss their demands for a peacetime settlement, having paused their trade union activity for the duration of the first world war. Now that the peace was signed, they were unwilling to go back to the pre-war status quo, demanding a 30 per cent wage increase, a six-hour day and the full nationalisation of the mines with extensive worker involvement (Hart 1920). The government made a counteroffer: an additional shilling a day and an inquiry. Although the miners were unimpressed with the offer, and the resulting Coal Commission was ultimately unable to come to a unanimous recommendation on nationalisation, it would go on to reshape social life in pit communities up and down the country (Morgan 1990).

Fearful of strike action, the government promptly implemented many of the Commission's recommendations in the Mining Industry Act of 1920, which included the Welfare Fund clause from which welfares derive their name. The clause decreed that coal owners transfer one penny per ton of coal into a fund for amenities for the recreation and wellbeing of workers 'in and about mines', which was later clarified to include disabled former miners, retired miners and miners' families (Morgan 1990). The fund was administered by a national committee alongside 25 local District Welfare Committees, which set out eagerly to build health facilities and educational programmes alongside a slew of social and cultural infrastructure. Although unsuccessful in its (partial) aim of placating the miners, mining communities made the most of the welfares, as spaces which reflected, fostered and institutionalised solidarity. Over time, the Welfare Fund experiment would result in a wealth of social and civic amenities, from South Wales lidos to Scottish ambulance facilities to East Midlands drinking establishments (Jones 2020).

Spaces where we might connect and forge solidarities are of the utmost importance to a well-functioning politics. These are places where, as political theorist Wendy Brown puts it, "we are more than private individuals or families, more than economic producers, consumers, or investors, and more than mere members of the nation" (Brown 2019). Democracy, she writes, "requires a robust cultivation of society as the place where we experience a linked fate across our differences and separateness". Whereas the structure of our society and our politics encourages solidarities at the level of the family and to some extent at the level of the nation, broader solidarities require that we cultivate spaces where we might meet each other, whether at the welfare, on the football pitch or at a union meeting – all settings the Miners' Welfare Fund once facilitated.

When the coal mines were nationalised, the welfares were folded into the fledgling welfare state, reflecting the importance of coal and the moral standing of its workers (Hilhorst 2024). It placed the welfares on a more permanent footing, at least so long as local authority budgets were healthy and support for the miners was high. Post-war affluence meant these welfares and other workers' spaces increasingly existed alongside domesticated social lives. Yet they continued to facilitate mundane forms of togetherness and more explicitly political solidarities, rehearsing and developing shared values and visions of the future.

Other social changes proved more difficult to weather. The Thatcherite assault on local government cut the financial foundations out from under many community spaces, not just in mining and manufacturing areas but across the country. In various ways, subsequent governments have sought to remedy the decline of local spaces, whether through the New Labour communities agenda or the post-Brexit Towns funding. But none of these have restored local government to its former role or intervened sufficiently in the political economy of the country to secure the future of community spaces – especially as many erstwhile workers' institutions became wholly dependent on public funding after the loss of their original constituencies and economic underpinnings because of deindustrialisation.

This process has changed how and where we encounter each other. Through an accident of history, the mass adoption of social media in the UK coincided with the introduction of austerity. At some point in 2012–13, social media networks reached a milestone 50 per cent penetration rate, which is to say that one in two UK adults had become active social media users (Internet access - households and individuals 2013). Online spaces were opening up at the very moment many austerity-ravaged physical community spaces were closing down. We now appear to be spending more time alone (Burn-Murdoch 2025), while long-running time use surveys have recorded a steady, decades-long decline in time spent socialising (Treadwell 2023).

A pincer movement of abandonment and gentrification sees community spaces lost in booming as well as struggling places, exacerbating a vicious circle of closures and rising alone time. Every month, 50 UK pubs close for good (Simpson 2024), with some studies linking higher rates of pub closures to elevated support for the far right (Bolet 2021). Many of the remaining spaces are struggling for their survival, including what remains of the vast social infrastructure of the miners' welfares, as well as the once-impressive community provision in larger cities, with an estimated 600 youth clubs shut between 2012 and 2016 (BBC News 2016). This process has not yet concluded: London lost almost 10 local authority-run community spaces a year between 2018 and 2023 (Foundation for Future London 2024).

This has far-reaching effects on the social and physical fabric of communities. Visiting the ruins of a Nottinghamshire welfare, the geographer Jay Emery

writes: “Welbeck Miners’ Welfare served the coalmining village where I grew up for almost ninety years until it closed in 2015. It was subsequently demolished, and remnants, in rubble form, are all that remain of the physical fabric. […] However, I could (still) faintly hear the clacking of pool balls and outdated songs playing, smell the fustiness of stale beer, [and] feel the linoleum-like textures of the seats” (Emery 2020). Some councillors will say that people are just not interested in these places anymore. But even as people decline to attend the half-empty pubs, decimated markets and Saturday night tribute acts down at the stripped-back welfare, locals mourn the loss of thriving communal spaces. As one Mansfield care worker told me: “It’s all been taken away.”

SOCIO-POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

The loss of community spaces like the welfares has at least three significant and interrelated effects on social life: the displacement of politics, an intensifying sense of decline, and the radical domestication of existence. When I was speaking to mining families in Mansfield over the course of my research, one ex-miner explained to me that his social and political world had become narrower and more home-bound over time. Initially involved in politics via his union and in community life through his football team, based at the welfare around the corner, he had become disillusioned with his representatives and slowly retreated into the private sphere. “You can probably knock on that door for so long. And then if nobody answers that door, you think, why, why bother? And so I think that’s what some people get to a point. You know, and for us, I think, as long as our families are okay… That’s, that’s our main thing.” His wife nodded emphatically: “And I think everybody’s in that frame of mind now.”

Where Mansfield’s miners were once inducted into a whole social universe via their workplace, this is now increasingly rare. The jobs that replaced the pits and factories tend to offer low wages and poor working conditions and make little contribution to community infrastructures. Meanwhile, growing numbers of people see their colleagues exclusively on the other side of a computer screen. Nationally, around one in six of those in work now carry out their profession entirely from home (Office for National Statistics 2023). In Mansfield, some graduates who have returned, either for the love of their hometown or due to caring responsibilities, have taken this path, which has become increasingly common thanks to the cultural and technological shifts brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. Insofar as this facilitates socialising through more open connections and identifications, not tied to one’s employment status, it could be a net positive. But for the most part the social spaces provided through workplaces and the labour movement have been replaced by nothing, which makes for a world of shallow socialising.

The changing relation between self, home and public space is infused with a pessimistic mood, as the loss of shared spaces and public amenities comes to function as an index of decline. One care worker and mother of four, who I will call Millie, painted a stark contrast between her own childhood in the 1980s and the lack of amenities for her kids. She described learning to play sports on the local pitches and playing instruments at the local pit band. Her father, a miner, would drop her off to get her out of his hair for a few hours and she loved it. “Pit bands, you really got a feel for the pit community. […] Stuck together, had a laugh.” But the closure of the pits spelled the end for many of the amenities, as funding disappeared, membership fell, and sites were left to decay or be redeveloped into upmarket housing. Without control over precious commodities such as coal, workers in Mansfield could not wield the influence they once had and were unable to stop the loss of amenities.

Millie was keenly aware of the price of admission for activities for her kids now – £12 per child for roller skating at the leisure centre, £102 if she wanted to take

the whole family to the cinema. “I was playing in the brass band when I was five years old. That’s all gone. And then school, [actually] used to do a music school on Saturday morning for 11-to-18-year-olds. Yeah, that disappeared, the Sure Starts disappeared. Everything’s just horrible because I’m watching… My kids don’t understand it because they never had it. But it hurts me, because I am like, what am I to do.” The loss of these spaces generated practical problems for parents as well as a loss of meaning and connection. “It’s stripped, stripped, stripped… Do you know what I mean? It’s the community.” In environments like these, promises of a better world ring hollow.

In Mansfield, remaining community spaces have a different relation to solidarity and to politics from the welfares. There is no shortage of charity, with local Facebook pages regularly featuring crowd funders for people going through a tough time, but politics and community have come to be seen as opposites. Some local Facebook groups have instituted bans on talking about politics, which proves too divisive. With the displacement of politics also comes the displacement of more politicised solidarities, leaving locals to raise money for people who have suffered misfortune, but rarely able to address the structural causes of these hardships. If the community is governed by norms of reciprocity, generosity and honesty, politics is thought to be dominated by the self-serving, the greedy and the deceitful (Hilhorst 2024). The main political beneficiary of this energy is the ascendant local chapter of Reform UK, which presents itself as a community-minded alternative to filthy politics.

With politics exorcised from (some) community spaces, individuals with stronger political convictions end up in private Telegram channels and WhatsApp groups with like-minded people or lurking on social media under anonymous handles. In some of these digital spaces, removed from the social control that tends to accompany face-to-face interaction, taboos on racist speech are eroded, while young men especially are inducted into the phraseology and rituals of the far right. In this paradoxical way, the apolitical or antipolitical set-up of community spaces facilitates radicalisation. Online far right groups often meet mundane concerns, as members share tips for physical fitness and muscle-building. Their pandemic-era online fitness clubs (Townsend 2022) have made the transition from the digital sphere to the physical realm (Quinn 2024), where they build exclusionary, twisted solidarities. This is not about bad online spaces versus good physical spaces. Rather it is about what happens when we fail to offer an alternative to loneliness and decline. Meaningful communities can exist on social media, or through online fan forums, or over a Discord server while playing Fortnite. But in the absence of face-to-face interaction, it is difficult to build strong solidarities and lasting organisations to counter the far right.

The loss of solidaristic spaces has been geographically uneven, with some areas less affected than others. The remarkable turnout at Palestine marches in 2023 and 2024, for example, draws not just on the dispersed energies of social media-enabled video sharing, but in the first instance on remaining sections of civil society, such as religious groups, campus-based organising and wider activist networks in larger cities, all of which maintain a physical presence. But progressive politics cannot subsist on such a narrow social and geographic base. As the scholar Sivamohan Valluvan has argued, progressives must reclaim the mundane conviviality of the provincial high street and the identikit shopping centres (Valluvan 2019). Notwithstanding the racism one can find anywhere, the UK’s provincial towns possess ample stocks of neighbourliness, good sense and working-class cosmopolitanism (Rogaly 2020; Valluvan 2022). But these energies often go wasted in the absence of opportunities to come together, whether in the workplace, at the school gates or in the pub, where they might strengthen the mundane solidarities that sustain civic life and make progressive politics thinkable.

REBUILDING PLACES TO COME TOGETHER

The state should endeavour to create, facilitate and maintain spaces where solidarity might thrive. Historically the provision of democratic spaces facilitates community building and organising, either when these spaces are made available through the power of the state (as with the miners' welfare acts) or when claimed without the backing of the state (as with the squatting movement of the 1970s and 1980s in Brixton, see Brixton Black Women's Group (2023), Vasudevan (2017) and Cook (2013)). This marks a difference between the welfares and the squats, and many well-intentioned but perpetually underfunded social cohesion strategies. People must have a real stake in shared spaces, not a dependence on a fickle funding stream which may or may not be renewed.

The state can facilitate this through a mix of legislative change and targeted investments, some of which are already under way. In 2011, the Localism Act gave communities the legal right to nominate places like pubs, grounds and venues to be recognised as 'assets of community value', with a view to taking them into community ownership. At present in England, the legislation offers only a six-month moratorium when assets of community value come up for sale, affording community groups time to gather funds under the 'community right to bid'. As a result, community organisers argue, the legislation is tokenistic at best – but it need not be. The legal framework can easily be tweaked to effect more substantial change, as the ACV infrastructure offers a foothold for expanding the commons. The government has suggested it will strengthen the ACV legislation in the English Devolution Bill, forthcoming this year. It is essential these reforms are carried out in full, amending the Localism Act 2011 to make right of first refusal the standard across the UK, ('right to buy' rather than 'right to bid',) including the right to an impartial valuation, mirroring existing Scottish legislation. The right should also be extended to derelict or unused sites of community interest, again after the Scottish example.

Secondly, in reforming the status of assets of community value, the state should specify a pathway for the (local) government to take a stake in the asset, drawing on previous work on Public-Common Partnerships (Russell, Milburn and Heron 2023). In this institutional design, the local or national state would partner with a Common Association (eg a cooperative or a community interest company), taking joint ownership and governing the joint enterprise together, along with relevant stakeholders. In some cases, community groups will prefer to go it alone but a public stake can vastly expand the possibilities, while giving (local) government new levers for reinvigorating communities. It would be a powerful resource for communities. Think only of an institution such as the Bethnal Green Working Men's Club, an iconic venue for the London queer community, which is now at risk of closure as developers eye the site (Houghton 2025). It has a vast base of support, but public money would be required to buy the site and to secure its community purpose for decades to come.

The limitation of these proposals is that they will tend to work best in places with a modicum of pre-existing organisation – workplaces where unions have already gained a foothold, places with existing community groups and neighbourhoods with well-organised faith communities. To bring real change to disillusioned, disengaged and declining communities, the state will need to bring more considerable resources to the task, as the original Mining Industry Act of 1920 did. This calls for a 21st-century welfare fund, raised via some version of an Amazon tax and to be spent on social infrastructure. Like the collieries that once stood in their place, large online retailers have erected giant structures, which testify to their financial might, but not contributed sufficiently to the communities around them. Rather than a coal levy, this could be achieved either through higher taxation of warehouses and distribution centres or through a 2 per cent online sales tax

on companies with revenues over £1 million, facilitating a larger, more sustained resource for communities than current community regeneration efforts.

The new welfare fund would differ from previous efforts such as the New Deal for Communities or the Towns Fund in size, ethos and ownership structure. Unlike the Towns Fund, it would not be based on competitive bidding, which can cost local authorities tens of thousands of pounds and tends to empower consultants and technocrats (McKee and Pope 2024). Instead, it would prioritise places with high levels of deprivation, low social mobility and little civic engagement, especially political participation. And unlike New Labour-era efforts, it would seek to create permanent community ownership, to reduce reliance on fickle government funding streams. While taking on board the positive aspects from past programmes such as the New Deal for Communities, the Welfare Fund would be framed not around 'aspiration', which defines communities by a perceived lack, but around community ownership, social infrastructure and solidarity.

Like the original Welfare Fund, and unlike many subsequent schemes, decision-making over the budget would be partially devolved to a very local level, although this comes with its own difficulties. At times, the aim of creating community spaces which meet a predetermined political ideal may conflict with the equally important aim of devolving decision-making powers to communities themselves. Nor do communities speak in a single voice – there will likely be conflicts, absences and other difficulties. Previous policy initiatives illustrate these trade-offs. In the 1990s, coalfield representatives successfully lobbied the government to trial new coalfield regeneration schemes. In Mansfield, this included an attempt to reinvigorate civil society by involving 'community champions' in the government of their area by training them and giving them a small budget to spend on neighbourhood improvements. The literature on participatory budgeting suggests that such projects can be emancipatory, involving the poor as well as the rich, nurturing informal local leaders and improving locals' sense of political efficacy (Baiocchi 2005; Baiocchi and Ganuza 2014). But in the context of structural decline and increasingly visible issues of drug dependency, participants and administrators of the scheme recall that much of the budget was spent on burglar alarms. While perfectly legitimate, this does not amount to the thriving culture of solidarity one might have hoped to see emerge.

This time around, a national coordination committee for the new Welfare Fund should set broad limits and directions. As with the original Welfare Fund, its explicit prerogative should be the provision of social infrastructure to meet everyday needs and provide a space to connect. Within these limits, the national coordination committee should embrace experimentation, working hand in glove with other agencies across policy areas to set a direction and provide a hopeful horizon. It should help broker connections between local groups, local authorities and relevant departments and develop best practice codes for social infrastructure, for example in designing school gates to facilitate interaction. In declining high streets and town centres, Welfare Fund resources could be used to bring iconic buildings back into community ownership and retrofit them to become anchor institutions for the everyday economy, including FE colleges or childcare facilities, adopting a deliberately broad view of what constitutes community spaces. Such amenities would bring footfall, revive shared spaces and stem the sense of decline.

Other meeting spaces, such as local markets, could be revitalised by comparatively small cash injections to lower costs and offer activities, making it easier for local makers to offer their wares and perhaps easier for locals to bring their kids. Much-loved piers like Southport's could be taken into common ownership (Hurley 2024). In booming areas, the Welfare Fund could help local groups raise the money to bring beloved pubs and other threatened spaces into community ownership. In

this way, spaces provided by a new Welfare Fund will tap into lived experience and serve not just people's higher ideals but also their narrower everyday concerns, helping parents find free activities for their children, generating access to sports and gym facilities and providing a space and a little budget for residents to organise a local music festival.

Underused and abandoned spaces provide an opportunity in this regard. One example is the Migration Museum in south east London, which is located in a formerly empty retail space in Lewisham Shopping Centre. At first glance, many of the visitors look like regular shoppers, carrying their orange Sainsbury's bags as they look at the displays. The museum fulfils a practical function for locals, as the ethnographer Clara Cirdan has documented. A varied group of people strays in, often for practical reasons, and is invited to contribute to telling and retelling the story of present-day Britain. Some people leave their children in the museum while they do their weekly shop, or come in to take a look at the exhibition when it is raining and they do not want to walk home just yet. Teenagers often drop in after school to hang out in the space. Similar projects to reuse retail spaces are taking place up and down the country (Craig 2024). As the charity Power to Change argues, former department stores in particular are often iconic places with great meaning to the local community. By democratising their use, they can foster new connections. One afternoon in the Migration Museum, Cirdan spots a teenager, still in his school uniform, intently reading about another visitor's migration history. When asked about his interest, he says: "I just wanted to hear what other people had to say. Maybe their story is similar to mine."

Innovative projects such as the Migration Museum are hard to sustain, however, without community ownership of the space or at least a very long lease. The Museum will have to leave its current space in 2027; Lewisham Shopping Centre is to be razed in a redevelopment drive. The museum itself will thankfully be preserved in a new location in the City of London. But there, it will inhabit a far more traditional museum space, bringing this particular experiment in democratising the museum (and the shopping centre) to an end. The wider politics of land and ownership mean that even where space is underused, as with shops that have been empty for a long time, it is difficult for those who take over those spaces to build a lasting foothold in the community. To some extent these issues can be remedied by penalising vacancy or, more comprehensively, by replacing council tax and business rates with a land value tax – a policy which would solve a host of issues. Even so, community ownership bestows unique advantages in accountability, permanence and experimentation.

Of course, the provision of community-owned spaces per se does not guarantee progressive politics. Not all solidarities are inclusive, and not all community spaces serve a progressive purpose. Even ostensibly progressive efforts, including the welfares themselves, are often marked by stark exclusions along lines of race and/or gender. Racialised communities often built alternative and more welcoming environments as, for example, the tradition of desi pubs attests to (Singh, Valluvan and Kneale 2024). If community spaces can form a bulwark against the far right, they can also be coopted by it. The history of community spaces is rife with examples of them being used to uphold racist norms and recruit members into far-right projects.

These are risks we will have to face. When progressives fail to organise spaces of belonging and becoming (Jackson 2020), the far right will. If the gym can be a site where far-right youths run militia-style exercises, it can also function as a rare space of belonging and becoming where past prejudices are refigured and at times suspended in light of a new conviviality (Singh 2022). For this reason, the rebuilding of social spaces must be finely attuned to ordinary desires and

run-of-the-mill interests. Even if people initially attend out of self-interest, solidarities can grow from the contact that emerges. For example, some of the most promising present-day consciousness-raising is undertaken by renters' unions, which encourage those at the sharp end of the housing system to see their fates as linked. Campaigners for groups such as the London Renters Union routinely knock on doors and offer to put tenants in touch with others who rent from the same landlord. Renters typically accept out of curiosity or self-interest, but they may be transformed over the course of engaging with one another, meeting up in churches and community centres. They become union members and potentially campaigners themselves. This is the work of solidarity: it asks of us not our charity, but that we allow our sense of ourselves and our own interests to be transformed over the course of our engagement with others.

A miners' welfare fund for the 21st century could give people a taste of what hopeful progressive politics looks like in their own neighbourhoods. Combined with legal changes – strengthening the community right to bid into a community right to buy, and facilitating public-common partnerships – it would be a transformative policy. Not only would it combat the sense of intractable decline but it would also invite locals to reconnect and develop new solidarities. In giving locals a say over significant amounts of money, it would foster community leadership and structures of representation, providing a pathway to resolve the opposition between community and politics.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

There are some reasons to be cautiously optimistic about the viability of the proposals outlined here. The proposals fit squarely within the Labour Party's stated aim of delivering for working people, including in many of the places that it won back at the last election and is keen to hold on to. Furthermore, the current government is keen to prove that this country can still build things, having correctly identified the risk that a persistent declinism poses to progressive politics. Social infrastructures can and should be part of the agenda to rebuild Britain. The summer riots of 2024 have also sparked renewed interest in social cohesion. A new social cohesion strategy, this essay has argued, should centre community control and remove barriers to community ownership. By focussing on democratic spaces, it could foster and fortify solidarities.

The government could use the existing Plan for Neighbourhoods to provide proof of concept by setting up community projects in the 75 selected areas, drawing on the £1.5 billion that has already been allocated under the plan. It could include setting up new childcare facilities, with a small budget to also run a watch-with-baby film club for overburdened young parents. It could involve working with community groups to create accessible fishing lakes on the old spoil heaps in former pit communities, to enable people to go angling together. It could mean working with existing local employers to reinvent the welfare. Such projects could give a glimpse of what might be possible if funding were further scaled up and spread out across the country.

The proposals also require a leap into the unknown, however. To create thriving spaces, policymakers must embrace the messiness of human interaction. Until now, none of the factions vying to define Starmerism have sought to harness popular-democratic energies, with even the left-most elements of the programme more defined by top-down green state interventions, which have themselves become more technocratic and statist since the end or failure of various municipalist energy projects.

Meanwhile, the fiscal context restricts the space for joyful experimentation. In the aftermath of austerity there is a temptation to make community spaces work harder and harder to earn their place, if they are to have a place at all. But the renewal of mundane solidarities will require an ethos of experimentation which is incompatible with strictures of efficiency. This is a difficult argument to make in the context of economic stagnation and, in many places, local decline. In the absence of sustained economic growth, redistribution or transformative investments in public services, politics easily collapses into a zero-sum contest over a fixed set of goods, which is disastrous for progressive visions. Locally, the loss of social infrastructure is often understood as a lack of care from Westminster, which in turn is liable to turn into the argument that the wrong people are receiving support and generosity. The loss of social infrastructure is far from the only driver of such sentiments, but it is a contributing factor.

The problems outlined here cannot be resolved by piecemeal efforts. Our civic malaise implicates not just citizens, but also the private equity giants that evict community centres from under London's arches; the cash-strapped councils that reluctantly permit beloved allotments to become luxury flats; and those politicians who are too remote from the communities they represent to fully comprehend the devastation. Civic and social renewal requires a fundamental shift. While eminently feasible within the current economic and fiscal constraints, the scale of the intervention must be far larger than the limited resources typically committed to community cohesion policies – it must be commensurate with the scale of the challenge.

A welfare fund for the 21st century can help progressives combat the far right by bringing people together in pursuit of their everyday needs and ambitions, providing a hub for community organising and countering the pervasive sense of decline. The new welfares will incubate new organisations and associations, which may offer what the political philosopher Jonathan White has described as sites of projection: places where we can formulate democratic visions of a shared future. Crucially, White writes, such associations "can give *confidence* in what lies ahead: they make available the distinctive idea of a cumulative project – a present that emerges from a historical tradition, finding inspiration in ideas and conflicts from the past, and extending them to the future" (White 2024).

The original Miners Welfare clause was written because of the existence of a well-organised, militant working-class movement which was able to exercise considerable control over essential commodities such as coal. There is no equivalent in our present moment to force the government's hand. Just over a century ago, a powerful movement premised on solidarity forced the creation of shared spaces. This time around, the order will have to be reversed. Our moment requires that we create an abundance of proximate, useful and inviting spaces, so that new solidarities might spring forth.

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