



**The Young  
Foundation**

# Rewriting the rulebook

A plan for greener, fairer, community-powered  
growth across the UK

## Shaping a fairer future We are the UK's home for community research and social innovation

As a not-for-profit, The Young Foundation brings communities, organisations and policymakers together, driving positive change to shape a fairer future.

Working to understand the issues people care about, The Young Foundation supports collective action to improve lives, involving communities in locally-led research and delivering distinctive initiatives and programmes to build a stronger society. The Young Foundation also powers the Institute for Community Studies.

For more information visit us at: [youngfoundation.org](https://youngfoundation.org)

**Authors:** Helen Goulden, Jessica Moore and Jacob Coburn

# Reviving trust, hope and ambition

Across the UK, people and communities are ready for change.

This is a pivotal time for our country. It's a chance to rebuild, putting the needs, insights and ideas of local people at the heart of policies and practice, and reimagining the ways in which communities interact with the institutions and processes that influence their prospects, planet and local places. With a 'community up' policy vision that is empowered through national, local and regional governance, we can ignite the potential for growth and innovation that exists in our neighbourhoods. We can improve people's lives, support healthier places, and create the conditions for a productive, caring and *just* society.

As each UK community has a unique blend of capabilities, opportunities and needs, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the social, environmental and economic challenges we face. The key is deep and meaningful collaboration between communities, businesses, civil society, and policy-influencers across all sectors.

With our sustained commitment to demonstrating the power of participation, The Young Foundation has proven experience in making connections and building momentum for positive change. This is much needed. Across the UK today, we see local communities expressing dissatisfaction and a lack of trust in politics and politicians. Not helped by scandals and wrongdoing, this is emblematic of a deeper malaise, where rhetoric does not match reality. People need to see improvements in their quality of life and believe that politicians are working in their interests.

The Young Foundation has the networks, experience and expertise to offer fast and accessible routes to working not just *for* but *with* people, informing policy that can unlock community potential, reap the benefits of rapidly advancing technologies and emerging opportunities, and enable every neighbourhood to thrive in a fairer, greener and more prosperous future.



**This is a moment to rebuild trust in our politics, reimagining how UK people can help shape their prospects, planet and local places.**

# Putting people at the heart of policymaking



**With local policies and making new laws - if you don't know what the people want, how are you going to know what to give to the people?**

Young woman, Corby

*Voices and experiences of young people in Corby,*  
The Young Foundation

Local people know their neighbourhood better than anyone – and those that stand to win, lose or have their life changed by policy shifts and local developments can inform lasting, solutions – both at local and regional levels.

Outlined in this document, The Young Foundation's vision puts social participation where it needs to be on the legislative agenda, inviting governments at all tiers to seize the potential to build trusted relationships between policymakers, businesses and civil society, and local people.

## Every UK community deserves

**safe and inclusive places** where everyone feels valued, secure and able to participate positively in society

**equitable prospects and prosperity**, with opportunities to learn, upskill and find meaningful employment, strengthening our neighbourhoods and our economy

**a fair green future** with local plans and innovation, as well as national policy and investment, to ensure every person thrives in a changed climate

**a strong and connected society** where people have easy access to local places and services, and communities are better equipped to respond to crisis

# Safe and inclusive places



**Community is not a space. It's not a centre. It's a feeling of looking out for each other. And I think that's what we have lost.**

Female, 43, Weymouth

*Safety in numbers?*, Institute for Community Studies at The Young Foundation

## The need

UK citizens say they don't feel safe in their neighbourhoods or able to positively contribute to the growth and success of their local community. Trust, and a feeling of connection to others living nearby, are also prime requirements for surviving or responding to crisis – whatever form that takes.

Furthermore, to create safe and inclusive spaces, people need deeper, more meaningful, long-lasting and agile routes to engagement, and a say in what happens in their neighbourhood. This requires new ways of working to build trusted relationships between government, businesses and local people.

## The evidence

In The Young Foundation's pre-pandemic (2019) research, safety ranked in the top five priorities for communities in every region across England and Wales. In five regions, it was the top priority.

This remains vital. In 2023, research with 4,600, 10- to 20-year-olds highlighted an acute need for greater safety: 69% said they modify their life to keep safe, 14% stay out of school due to fear of what awaits them. The main causes of youth violence were identified as a lack of safe spaces to socialise; feeling powerless regarding political and institutional change; poverty; and

social media. Our tweens and teens want spaces to feel safe, mentally well, and happy. Yet we've seen a 69% reduction in youth service provision since 2010-11.

Our work with other demographics mirrors these concerns about safety. Hearing from housing estate residents in 2023-24, safety was the most important issue, with people flagging crime and antisocial behaviour, a lack of visible policing, poor lighting and areas of disrepair, and fears their homes didn't always feel safe.

Meanwhile, parks and green spaces enhance people's feelings of safety - and that connection with nature is important to many, driving community work to protect the environment. We know the value of free access to inclusive spaces and the difference it makes in weaving strong social fabric in local places. But such spaces must be right for their community, addressing local physical and psychological barriers to ensure they are thriving, well-used, and long-lasting investments.

## The path ahead

Policymakers, businesses and communities need mechanisms that enable and support them to drive meaningful, locally-relevant change. This must include plans to engage young people in designing local youth services, and the funding to deliver the safe spaces young people need. Local private sector actors, meanwhile, should be supported with routes deliver

on their environmental, social and governance (ESG) commitments, relevant to their places. And there is a strong case for legislation to increase the power of local people to buy community assets and shape public services.

# Equitable prospects and prosperity



I would make it so that the people that have the power, actually do something with their power, because I feel like I want to make a change and I want to make a big difference, but there's not a lot that one person can do.

Female, South-west

*Beyond the foggy and uncertain*, The Young Foundation

## The need

To preserve and extend the UK's reputation in education, research and innovation (R&I), and through the global economy, every community and individual needs access to opportunities that enhance their prospects and prosperity, with routes to participate in local change. By building a culture of lifelong learning development, and by seizing the employment opportunities and wider, place-based benefits of green and technology-enabled industries, the UK can lead on the global stage.

## The evidence

Investment in education, infrastructure and innovation alone will not drive equitable economic outcomes; **our research** found that over 15 years, successive governments and £20bn in targeted interventions failed to change relative economic deprivation in the UK. What that means is, despite investment, if you were poor then, you're poor now. Yet today - as 86% of **businesses say** their ESG responsibilities will be increasingly important through to 2027, and 73% say ESG is core to their business strategy - there is significant opportunity to harness local and business aims to drive fairness and growth.

Part of that is about building a stronger culture of engagement within our communities – and that

**starts in our education systems**, unlocking the civic potential and role of young people, of all ages, in meaningful ways.

In seeking to drive prosperity in their place by reducing inequality and supporting the local economy, 'civic universities' can play a crucial role in **driving growth and productivity** plans, working with policymakers to unlock wider social benefits. And we know that **investment in community leaders**, such as volunteers, school governors and councillors, can support communities to take advantage of local economic opportunities.

Employment opportunities and experiences are vital too, ensuring fair and accessible routes for people in all postcodes and circumstances. Applying research and data on how regional approaches impact incomes, poverty, health, and other measures of wellbeing, can empower employers to **drive up equality, diversity and inclusion, and support vulnerable people in the workplace**.

## The path ahead

To empower regions, businesses, and communities towards equitable prospects and prosperity, we need place-based perspectives and policies, and national and regional growth strategies. These should be specifically designed to ensure outcomes are

effectively shared across communities, and should include regions working with national research infrastructure to recognise local impact on incomes, poverty, health, and other measures of wellbeing. Engaging, collaborative programmes that enable policymakers to tap into **community-held knowledge and research** will unlock wider social benefits and increase local prosperity.

Meanwhile, a reimagined programme of citizenship skills development that starts in schools and rolls out across communities, offering lifelong opportunities, will provide equity of access and amplify community voice through to local and national government.

The Young Foundation has the expertise and experience to support such change, working with communities and across sectors to build capabilities through **community research**, social action and innovation.

# A fair, green future



**Ultimately, everyone is affected by [climate change], and whoever is affected should have a conversation about it.**

*Talking transitions: the road to net zero,*  
The Young Foundation

## The need

The UK's transition to net zero so far has focused on technological solutions and industrial transformation. We now need a more holistic approach, building participation in decisions and policy change, and capitalising on the wider benefits that come from low-carbon opportunities and places.

With greater collaboration between industry, government, innovation and communities, new technologies can be made accessible for all. A public participation strategy that accounts for varying levels of 'readiness' for transition in different households and regions is vital to support everyone to a greener, fairer future.

## The evidence

UK households face a range of challenges that stop them participating in the transition to low-carbon living and **our research** finds this will lead to deepening inequalities over time. These include financial burdens, such as running inefficient energy systems that incur higher costs, or those unable to afford home adaptations or stop using polluting vehicles facing penalties. Without policy to address these challenges, the poorest 40% of households will be unable to transition to net zero.

The Young Foundation's research found that most people want to participate in net zero transition but lack the information and confidence to make decisions, leading to disappointing uptake of low-carbon technologies.

At the same time, **analysis by the Climate Change Committee** found that net zero transition could provide 'growth in high-quality jobs, distributing opportunities across regions and increasing diversity' - if the 'right conditions' are in place. For these benefits to be shared widely, with long-lasting and positive impact, policies must mitigate harms and support those who stand to lose, ensuring everyone can thrive through the UK's green transition.

Building community confidence in the UK's net zero transition must sit at the centre of policy planning. The Young Foundation's framework for a person-centred, place-based approach to '**green**' policy development can help unlock household engagement, identifying inclusive and fair pathways.

## The path ahead

We need a more integrated system between local government, national government, public and private sectors, and communities.

Pilot community programmes in different regions could test products and trial ways to share information and innovation to reduce financial risk, supporting every person to participate, regardless of income or background

Distributed powers, shifting some decisions away from Westminster, could also engage people in the design of local policy, centring a data-driven 'place readiness' approach, informed by The Young Foundation's Index of Readiness.

# A strong and connected society



Ever since we had [more local amenities]... there's been a massive uptake in community cohesion and things going on... It creates a sense of community which, if it's not there, that creates a vacuum.

East London Resident

*15-minute neighbourhoods in Waltham Forest,*  
The Young Foundation

## The need

Creating positive, vibrant environments with easily accessible, attractive local services and amenities, and recognising **what local people require of their community**, is crucial to improving local health and happiness.

High levels of trust and strong social infrastructure are vital for a thriving society, especially when we need to adapt and respond to difficulty or crisis. This includes communities having a clear understanding of the value and effectiveness of government investment, and being **better prepared** for, and more equipped to respond to, local or national emergencies - including a pandemic, wildfire, flood or attack.

## The evidence

Our 2022-23 research into the purpose and **value of 'social infrastructure'** - free and accessible spaces for people to come together - shows that strong, connected communities with trusted public institutions are more healthy, with greater economic growth, and less 'brain drain' as local people are more likely to remain in, and contribute, to their economy. At a national level, commitment to providing social infrastructure can deliver greater feelings of trust in politicians and the political system.

The condition and accessibility of the places people live in and the services we use have a significant impact on our mental and physical health. This is reflected in the nearly two-decade **difference in life expectancy for women** between the UK's most deprived and most affluent communities.

Yet recent policy has led to a reduction in spaces that enable connectivity between communities – notably a **69% reduction in youth service provision since 2010-11**.

Communities are well-placed to help design and deliver new social infrastructure, with **The Young Foundation's research** showing that people understand what their neighbourhoods need to thrive, making them an invaluable resource for policymakers. Common sense and pragmatism are in evidence too, with communities acknowledging that their neighbourhoods cannot have everything, and that "inclusion, access and social connection" are as crucial as assets, services and spaces.

## The path ahead

For a localised, community-powered approach to creating happy, healthy places to succeed, regional leaders and communities should not only co-develop policies and investment plans, but also collaboratively and regularly review the impact of these changes.

Dormant Assets Funding for Community Wealth Funds can help leverage private sector development contributions into community assets, as has been identified as a **priority by communities** themselves. And new legislation should enable communities to more easily take ownership or management of **assets of community value**.

Funding for local community places, decided with local people, is also vital - and that must include much-needed spaces shaped by and for young people. This means committing to sustainable, **community-involving research infrastructure**, with a research-focused Communities Committee advising central government.

Together, these measures would enable locally-informed policies that improve people's lives, increasing community connectedness and shaping programmes to build a stronger society.

# Recommendations:

A fairer, greener more prosperous UK requires a strong civil society and better-connected communities, able to withstand future crises as they arise.

This is the foundation of any lasting shift towards tackling inequalities and increasing societal wellbeing. Our policy recommendations build the conditions for this in all UK places, particularly those experiencing disadvantage and historical disinvestment:

## 1. Put communities and civil society at the heart of policymaking

- **Invest in our shared civic places**, where people can learn, create, and organise together. This is particularly important for younger people, and to fostering intergenerational trust and understanding. Investment in **civic universities**, for example, would support institutions to open up their assets, benefiting the wider community as well as universities themselves.
- **Launch a green public participation strategy**, identifying place and community readiness for a just transition to net zero, which will inform policy priorities across government departments, including housing, employment, education and other areas.
- **Build whole-society preparedness** for communities to adapt to future shocks, whether local or national, and however caused. Do this through mandating that community participation is embedded into Local Resilience Forums.
- **Embed community research in policymaking**, ensuring the review being undertaken by the Academy of Social Sciences to inform use of evidence in policymaking encompasses community and peer-led research methods and its impact in key policy areas.

## 2. Accelerate political and social engagement in all areas of the UK

- **Embed community involvement at a national level** and create the infrastructure to support it. We need coherent policy supporting community voice and power within a democratically representative system. A blueprint for community involvement in all other tiers of government is also needed to create a citizen-involving political economy.
- **Introduce new community rights**, as proposed by the We're Right Here campaign. These include a Community Right to Buy, giving communities first refusal when places with significant local value come up for sale; a Community Right to Shape Public Services, encouraging greater collaboration between communities and public institutions; and a Community Right to Control Investment on key spending decisions that affect local neighbourhoods.
- **Reimagine Citizenship curriculum in UK schools and beyond** to deliver lifelong development for all UK citizens and communities. To thrive through the 21st century, we must equip people with new skills and collaborative mindsets, so they can navigate changing employment, and build social purpose. This means reimagining what our young people need and deserve in their education, and supporting everyone through societal, environmental, demographic and technological changes.

## 3. Strengthen connections between communities and businesses, research and innovation

- **Empower businesses to deliver greater social impact**. Pass the Better Business Act, making it the duty of a company director to promote the purpose of the company, and operate the company in a manner that benefits its members, wider society, and the environment; and advance UK development of a social disclosure framework, giving businesses a blueprint for measuring their social value.
- **Direct investment in research and innovation to influence policy and practice** in key areas of critical social and environmental concern, building on the work of UKRI, The Young Foundation and initiatives such as the Local Policy Innovation Partnerships (LPIPs). Tackling complex and entrenched social challenge requires the involvement of people and society. Building clear links between academia, local government and communities will reveal deeper insights into root social causes, and build capacity for solution development and implementation.
- **Embed community-powered policymaking within devolution settlements**, ringfencing 1% of the £5bn of new devolution investment, for community research and involvement in local policymaking.





## Across the UK, people and communities are ready for change.

To hear more about The Young Foundation's expertise and approach, or discuss how we can support delivery of your work, please contact [communications@youngfoundation.org](mailto:communications@youngfoundation.org)

[www.youngfoundaton.org](http://www.youngfoundaton.org)

X: @The\_Young\_Fdn

LinkedIn: The Young Foundation

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