ICON Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods

Pride in Parades Part 1:

The State of Neighbourhood Social Infrastructure

ICON Research Working Paper

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About ICON

The Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (ICON) launched in September 2024. The Commission is reviewing the current state of neighbourhoods across England, examining the role of neighbourhoods in people's lives, quantifying and qualitatively exploring the case for neighbourhood focused regeneration as a contribution to achieving wider social and economic objectives. The Commission is also establishing 'what works' by drawing on both international and domestic evidence, with a particular focus on the most deprived and 'left behind' communities.

The Commission is chaired by Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top and supported by a small, cross-party group of experts, practitioners and others with a keen interest in neighbourhood issues. Funded by Local Trust, the Commission is run by an independent secretariat and commissioners are supported by an academic panel, a lived experience panel and a representative group of community sector organisations.

ICON Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods

Contents

Executive Summary

The decline of the high street is becoming one of the most salient challenges among the public. Recent polling has found that, after the cost of living, the decline of the local high street is what most concerns people about their local area - with 79% of people holding these concerns.[1]

On our visits across the country, we have seen residents deeply frustrated about the deterioration of their high street. The shuttered shops, the loss of the local pub or café, the litter and graffiti, and the lack of agency to do anything about it, is evidently driving a broader feeling of discontent against the government and the belief that the state can improve their lives.

But we have also noticed that when we talk to residents about their high street, what they are actually talking about is more often not their town or city centre. Often what they are talking about is their local parade.

Local parades are the "shops down the road": the places at the end of their street or around the corner where they buy milk, send parcels, visit the chemist, drop the kids off at nursery, or meet friends for a catch up. They are far smaller in scale than large town and city centre high streets, yet they still serve a very active role in people's day to day lives.

Although billions of pounds have been spent towards the very worthy goal of regenerating our town and city centres, local parades have seen very little research or policy attention. The government's new Pride in Place strategy signals a growing understanding of the role that neighbourhood conditions play in people's lives, and the strategy has a particular focus on revitalising high streets that have declined. Yet much about our local parades remains unknown. How exactly do they contribute towards the social, economic, and civic lives of the residents that live around them? How well are they fulfilling that purpose? What are the differences between parades in more affluent and more disadvantaged areas, and how might this have changed over time?

In this report, which is part one of two being produced by the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (ICON) and Popular, we present our analysis of the conditions of local parades in England today.

Key findings:

Our data can now evidence what many of the people that have been engaged as part of ICON's work have known for a long time: that the amenities, services and spaces that line our local parades are strongly associated with social cohesion and civic participation.

Parades are anchoring sites for supporting social capital development in neighbourhoods: they carry out civic and social roles that distinguish them from town centres as crucial hyperlocal hubs. However, the core social function we see being fulfilled on the local parades of more affluent areas is unrecognisable in the most deprived areas.

1 The Times, Why the next election will be fought on our corrupted high streets, 2025 (Paywalled)

1. Deprived neighbourhood parades have a weaker social infrastructure offer

Deprived neighbourhood parades, in comparison to affluent parades, average:

- Around 25% less social infrastructure amenities, such as pubs, café's and coffee shops, gyms, leisure centres and social clubs, as well as local health, digital, and educational services, and 70% more over saturated retail premises, which include off licenses, takeaways, betting shops, and vape shops.
- Less than half the number of informal third spaces, relying on formally organised activity based around services, such as community centres and advice centres.
- Half the number of extracurricular childcare assets – which includes nurseries, Sure Start centres and children's centres.
- We also see that transport exclusion, through both lower car ownership and weaker public transport access, isolates people from their town centre and confines them to their neighbourhood parades, creating social infrastructure 'deserts' in disadvantaged, disconnected neighbourhoods.

2. Deprived neighbourhood parades are also far weaker in supporting healthy lifestyles

- Deprived neighbourhood parades average more formal health services such as GPs but around half as many health-promoting amenities, such as gyms and spas, leisure centres, wellness centres and health clinics, in comparison to affluent parades.
- Deprived neighbourhood parades average less healthy food retailers and far more unhealthy food options - 2.2 unhealthy food retailers for every healthy food retailer, compared to 1.2 unhealthy food retailers for every healthy food retailer in the most affluent neighbourhood parades.
- Neighbourhood parades in deprived areas are becoming more homogenous, with a proliferation of over-saturated retail and health-reducing amenities meaning 1 in 8 retail premises facilitate smoking, gambling and cheap alcohol in the most deprived neighbourhood parades, compared to 1 in 12 in the most affluent neighbourhood parades.

Policy recommendations

Our recommendations are informed by the work of **Popular's Pride in Place, Part 2: Strategies for Renewing Neighbourhood Social Infrastructure**, which provides more detail around some of these recommendations. This investigates five case studies where low-income neighbourhood parades have been transformed using existing levers and powers, drawing lessons for a set of 'routes to local renewal', as well as further recommendations for both local and national policymakers to help unlock greater capacity to revitalise local parades.

We outline two key objectives for local and national government.

The first is to support more curation and cultivation of social infrastructure in disadvantaged local parades - promoting vibrancy, variety, and a deeper social life in these neighbourhoods.

This could be achieved by:

- Strengthening place management capacity through a front door service within or adjacent to central government, based on a "what works" model, that provides capacity support and guidance to Neighbourhood Boards and other local actors working on high street renewal.
  - This new service should support Neighbourhood Boards and other local actors to embed social infrastructure as a core pillar of their overall high street renewal plans. It should also have a dedicated focus on community ownership as a way of securing social infrastructure on high streets where conventional commercial models have broken down.

- The introduction of Super Community Improvement Districts, which are special zones with strengthened place making powers around planning, tax, and tenant curation.
- Improving the capacity of communities to adopt existing place-shaping levers that can be deployed locally. This includes 'council-owned, community-run partnerships' which could be known as 'Community Asset Stewards', as well as High Street Rental Auctions.

Our second objective for government is to improve health outcomes by supporting more availability of health-promoting amenities: places and spaces that actively promote healthy lifestyle choices - in disadvantaged neighbourhood parades

This could be achieved by:

- Using start up and conversion grants for local entrepreneurs and social enterprises looking to operate health and sports venues or healthy food outlets in disadvantaged areas.
- Low-cost, state-supported and cooperatively run canteens or cafés that could be set up to offer nutritious meals at affordable prices, doubling as social hubs.
- Neighbourhood Service Hubs: small-scale multi-disciplinary service teams that act as a first point of prevention, focusing on 'soft interventions' such as embedding health into other parts of public service delivery, targeting lifestyle adjustments and long-term health management which could be around diet, physical exercise, help with addiction, substance use, and mental health management.

Introduction

Over our many visits up and down the country, one of the most common concerns that residents raise with us is the decline of their local high street. But we have found that when residents talk about high streets, and when politicians talk about high streets, they are often talking about two different things.

We have found that when residents talk to us about their high street, what they are overwhelmingly talking about is what we call a "local parade". They talk about the shops down the road: the small run of units at the end of their street or around the corner where they buy milk, send parcels, visit the chemist, drop the kids off at nursery, or meet friends for a catch up. Local parades live all across the country, in our big and small cities, towns and villages. They are stitched into the rhythm of daily life rather than set apart from it — the small, familiar places people pass every day without thinking.

We have experienced a huge variety of local parades whilst on our visits across the country, but too often the picture is bleak. Tattered shop fronts that sit in front of graffitied benches, surrounded by cracked pavements on littered streets.

The feeling of loss described by residents is often profound. But rarely is it described as a physical loss. Much more often we hear the decline of the local parade described as a social loss to the neighbourhood. The pubs we have seen that called their last orders many years ago, and the boarded-up libraries and cafes that live among the shopfronts, are not just a mark of physical decline, but a deeper unravelling of community and connection.

When we talk to politicians about high streets, however, they are almost always talking about something different: the town or city centre. We have all seen clips of politicians walking through the town centre of their constituency and pointing to shuttered shops and boarded-up pubs, sitting alongside abundant vape shops and bookies.

They are virtually never talking about local parades, despite the local parade being of high importance to so many people both for running their daily tasks and for staying connected with their neighbourhoods. They are particularly important in the most deprived communities: low-income households tend to spend more of their time in and around their neighbourhoods than richer ones, so the facilities that are – and aren't – on their local parade make a significant difference to how they go about their daily lives and, crucially, how far they are able to build and maintain connection with their neighbours.

The politician's fixation on the town and city centre is reflected in the significant public policy focus that they have had versus local parades. Town and city centre regeneration has often been the core focus of recent government attempts at high street regeneration - over £8bn of the government's regeneration spending has been directed at town centres via the Future High Streets Fund, Towns Fund and Levelling Up Fund. The focus of the High Streets Task Force[2] was also largely on town and city centres, with just 18% of locations in neighbourhoods, despite local parades making up nearly two thirds (63.7%) of our high streets nationally.

Trying to improve town and city centres is no bad thing: the challenges they face are very real, and that warrants a concerted effort to reimagine their future purpose and restore many of them to the strengths they enjoyed in their earlier lives.

But we have paid virtually no attention to the deterioration of our local parades. Yet we have found that often it is the state of the local parade, rather than the town and city centre, that is overwhelmingly driving the feelings of neglect and decline held by many who live in our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

2 Parker, C, Barratt, J, Colledge, M, Davis, M, Graciotti, A, Kazakou, Afroditi Maria, Millington, Steve, Mumford, Christine, Ntounis, N, Roberts, G, Sewell, M and Steadman, C, 2025a, High Streets Task Force Post-Programme: Technical Data. Project Report. Manchester Metropolitan University. https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/639513/ (https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/639511/)

There has also been comparatively little research done into local parades. By being based within neighbourhoods they will naturally serve a different purpose than town and city centres will. But what is that purpose? What purpose do we want them to serve? And are they fulfilling that purpose?

This report seeks to fill that gap. We present first-of-its-kind analysis that defines and tells the story of our local parades, both in terms of how they are today and how they have changed over the last decade.

Vibrant local parades are essential to neighbourhoods, helping to realise the potential of their residents. They are essential in the development of social capital. Much of our social infrastructure lives on the local parade – they are where many of our social institutions such as community centres, pubs, local businesses, and advice centres are. They are essential for enabling us to live healthy lives – chemists, GPs, dentists, health clubs, sports clubs, and leisure centres, are disproportionately found in neighbourhoods.

But this is not often the case in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Their local parades have significantly fewer local services, places for people to meet, and healthy food options, and are becoming dominated by over-saturated retail such as off licenses, takeaways, betting shops, and vape shops. The core social function we see being fulfilled on the local parades of more affluent areas is less recognisable in the most deprived areas.

We must be honest about the disrepair and neglect found in the nation's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. But a brighter future is possible. In some of the most distressed areas up and down the country, we have seen countless stories of collective renewal, with local people pitching together to cultivate their neighbourhood – empowering the local traders, service providers and social enterprises that energise and give meaning to our streets.

In focus: What even is a "neighbourhood parade", and what is it good for?

We have worked with a data partner tracking the evolution and performance of most retail, leisure, and commercial buildings across the country. The data is clarified into various types of retail and leisure units at fine detail – we can distinguish between, for example, whether a building is a community centre, sports centre, a pub, a medical centre, or an Italian restaurant. The richness of this data enables us to bring together the commercial, societal and cultural functions that these parades play – allowing us an insight into each area's characteristics more holistically.

Using this dataset we first define neighbourhood parades versus regular high streets, or "major destinations":

- Neighbourhood parades: Middle Layer Super Output Areas (MSOAs) with between 30-100 non-residential units, predominantly based in residential areas. (n=2,538).
- Regular high streets: Middle Layer Super Output Areas (MSOAs) with between 125-250 non-residential units. These are usually mixed residential and commercial areas. (n=697).
- Major destinations: Middle Layer Super Output Areas (MSOAs) with over 300 non-residential units. These are exclusively commercial districts, and all major town and city centres sit within this definition (n=427).

Using Middle Layer Super Output areas, this analysis captures the density of commercial units within neighbourhoods, which may include one or several shopping parades within each MSOA.

Using this data and these definitions, our analysis focuses on trying to understand:

- What distinguishes neighbourhood parades from other types of high streets? What are their unique characteristics, assets, and social functions?
- How does the provision of social infrastructure differ across different types of neighbourhood parades? For example, in more deprived neighbourhoods versus more affluent ones?

Table 1: Examples of our three high street categories

Neighbourhood parade

Ridingleaze, Lawrence Weston, Bristol

A small local parade in the outskirts of Bristol, serving residents of nearby council estates, opposite a village green.

Broadfield Barton, West Sussex

A shopping parade in a suburb of Crawley, with a library, places of worship and a community centre for local residents.

Regular high street

Kentish Town High Road, North London

Predominantly a shopping area offering a mixture of retail chains and independent shops and music venues.

'Curry Mile', Manchester

Popular leisure hub with a wide range of restaurants, takeaways and shisha lounges.

Major destination

Ipswich Town Centre, Suffolk

Wide range of shopping facilities, live music venues, restaurants and major national retailers, and two large shopping complexes, attracting people from further afield.

Northumberland Street, Newcastle

Bustling shopping district that hosts multiple international retailers, cafes, banks and shopping centres.

Chapter 1 - Understanding neighbourhood parades: what purpose do they serve?

The neighbourhood parade is characteristically different from larger high streets in town and city centres, which have in recent years dominated the discourse. Their offering differs in several ways – the retail offer, the nature of activity, social spaces and things to do, and the nature of public services. Our analysis suggests that neighbourhood parades are where much of our social infrastructure lives – meaning they play crucial social functions in communities that town centres do not fulfil in the same way. We also see neighbourhood parades perform better than town centres, with less closed shops – indicating social infrastructure has a role to play in improving the vibrancy of high streets.

As Figure 1 shows, neighbourhood parades have a higher density of social institutions than larger high streets and town and city centres.[3] This includes pubs, social clubs, sports clubs, advice centres, and community centres/halls. They are also important for supporting and maintaining a healthy living environment: health and leisure activities including gyms, health clubs, and leisure centres also tend to be more greatly concentrated within the places people live versus their town or city centre. Convenience retailers, too, tend to cluster on neighbourhood parades, whilst comparison retailers (selling more expensive items such as clothes, tech goods, and furniture) tend to cluster in larger centres.

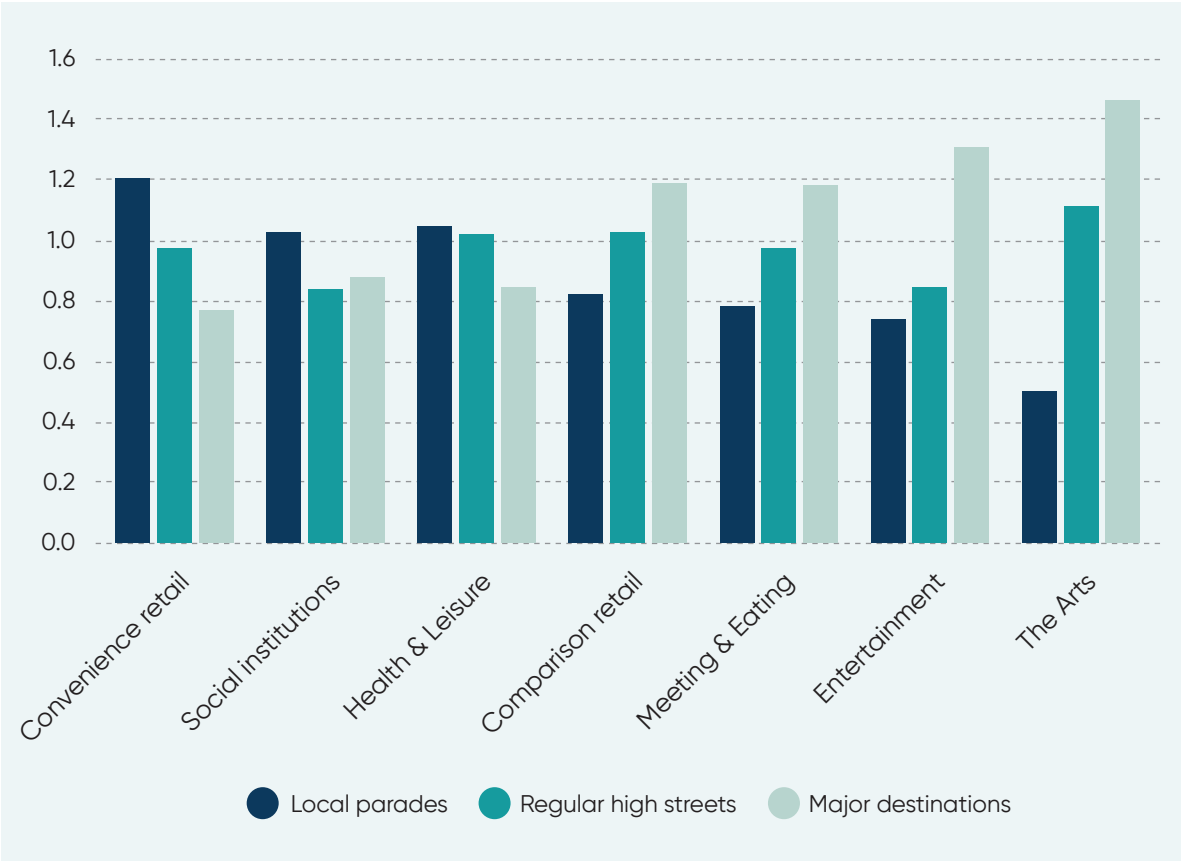
Importantly, neighbourhood parades are generally not places of night-time entertainment, as Figure 1 shows: restaurants, cinemas, bars, nightclubs, theatres, and other nighttime economy venues are more concentrated in larger high streets and town and city centres.

Location Quotient: the extent to which something is specialised in a particular geography.

Location Quotient > 1 = a disproportionately large density of assets within a particular geography. Example: Convenience retail scores an LQ of 1.2 in neighbourhood parades. This means that there are 20% more convenience stores in neighbourhood parades than expected based on their average density across the country.

3 See definitions in Annex

Figure 1: Location Quotient of various types of commercial and social activity in neighbourhoods, regular high streets, and major destinations

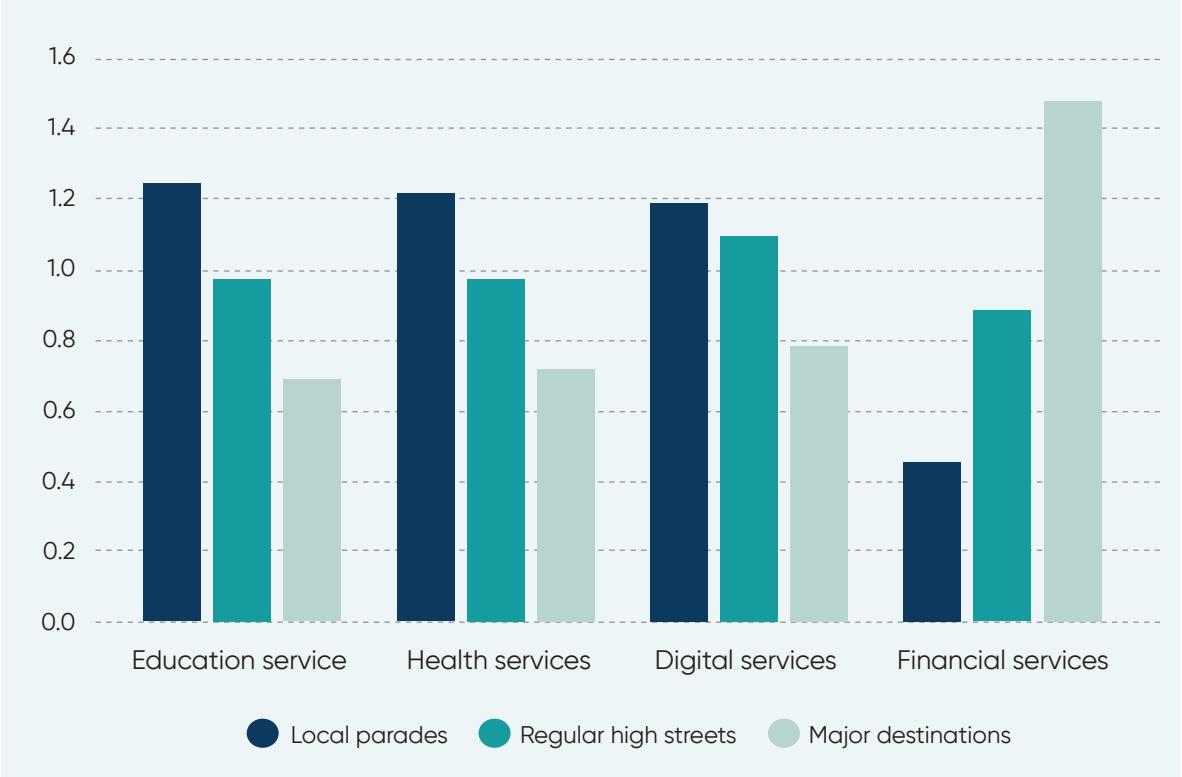


Source: Green Street (2025), ICON analysis

The neighbourhood parade is also, for many, the point of daily access for many essential public and community services. As Figure 2 shows, neighbourhood parades tend to have a higher proportion of health, digital, education, and other public services. These are services delivered not only by the public sector but also by the third and private sectors: they include GP practices and medical centres, tuition centres, early years centres, internet café's, and libraries. The main type of public service that neighbourhood parades lack relative to regular high streets and town and city centres is financial services, particularly retail banking.[4]

4 Smith, Here's what Britain's ideal high street looks like, YouGov (2018) https://yougov.co.uk/consumer/articles/20984-heres-what-britains-ideal-high-street-looks

Figure 2: Location Quotient in various retail centres: types of commercial and social activity



Source: Green Street (2025), ICON analysis

The national proportion of selected units that are located in neighbourhood parades is shown below - for example, neighbourhood parades host 27% of all units nationally, but 32% of the units occupied by health services. This is in comparison to major destinations, which host 33% of all units nationally, but only 23% of health services.

What function, then, do neighbourhood parades serve?

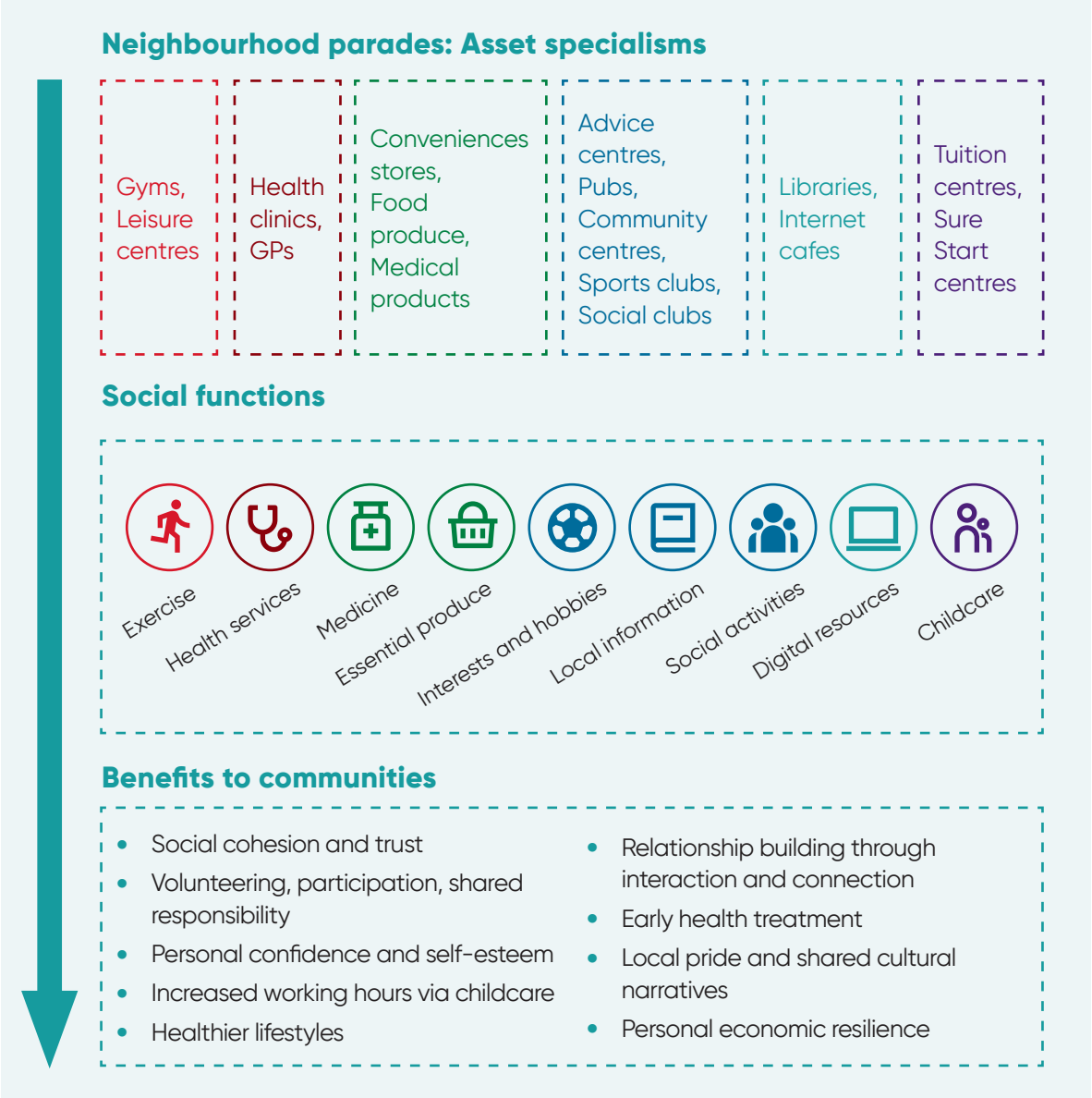
It is clear that, nationally, neighbourhood parades are where much of our social infrastructure lives.

Whilst town centres are important hubs of commercial activity, major transportation links, entertainment and nightlife, and government institutions, parades have an outsized role to play in developing social capital within communities.

ICON's work to date has stressed the importance of social capital development as the foundational factor that is a vital first step in rebuilding the foundations of the most disadvantaged areas. This requires the provision of social infrastructure; spaces, activities, institutions that connect people to civic, social, cultural life – whether this be places to meet and access social networks, support accessing services and employment, take part in physical activity and exercise. The density of social infrastructure and daily services in neighbourhood parades supports the notion that social capital is fostered where people live, and that they have an outsized role to play in rebuilding communities.

Not all social infrastructure is the same, though; different forms of social infrastructure that tend to be based in and around neighbourhood parades provide distinct social functions. The illustration below outlines how the various forms of social infrastructure that we have identified as being more prominent in neighbourhood parades can help contribute to the development of social capital within a neighbourhood setting.

How local parades contribute to the building of social capital



Chapter 2 - Social disparity: how the provision of social infrastructure differs across neighbourhoods nationwide

The key element that distinguishes neighbourhood parades from larger high streets in town and city centres, as our analysis shows, is that they tend to have deep concentrations of social infrastructure and local services. Yet while that may be true if we look at the national picture, we know already that many of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods tend to have less social infrastructure.[5] The cost of this is substantial. Deprived areas that also lack social infrastructure, otherwise known as "doubly deprived" neighbourhoods, do substantially worse across all key economic, health, and crime outcomes, even compared to areas that are deprived but have better levels of social infrastructure.[6]

This section outlines the main findings from our analysis exploring the extent to which the provision of social infrastructure varies across different types of neighbourhood parades, with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Overall, we find that there are four points of significant difference between neighbourhood parades in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and neighbourhood parades elsewhere:

- Parades in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods average 23% less overall social infrastructure than in the most affluent neighbourhoods, and are becoming increasingly blighted by the proliferation of over-saturated retail and services. Since 2015, parades in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods have seen a steep rise in over-saturated retail, which is driving their increasing homogeneity, in comparison to more affluent neighbourhood parades. Deprived neighbourhood parades now average 73% more over-saturated units than affluent neighbourhood parades.[7]
- There are significantly less places to meet and socialise in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, which tend to have less pubs, social clubs, and other social spaces compared to parades in other areas. The average number of all "third spaces" in disadvantaged neighbourhoods is 22% less than in more affluent neighbourhoods, and where third spaces exist, they tend to be "formal" spaces such as community centres, that are disproportionately provided by the charity and public sectors.
- There is a greater density of formal health services such as GPs and health centres in disadvantaged neighbourhood parades. But the wider neighbourhood parades offer is one which makes living a healthy live more difficult.
  - There are on average 40% less health-promoting amenities such as gyms, health clubs, and leisure centres on parades in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, compared to more affluent ones.
  - Disadvantaged neighbourhood parades have a far higher ratio of unhealthy food retailers for every healthy food retailer, in comparison to more affluent ones – with 2.2 unhealthy food retailers for every healthy food retailer, compared to 1.2 unhealthy food retailers for every healthy food retailer in the most affluent neighbourhood parades.

5 https://localtrust.org.uk/policy/left-behind-neighbourhoods/
6 Ibid.
7 'Over-saturated retail': Fast Food Takeaways, Bookmakers, Vaping Stores and Tobacconists

- 1 in 8 retail premises facilitate smoking, gambling and cheap alcohol in the most deprived neighbourhood parades, compared to 1 in 12 in the most affluent neighbourhood parades.

- Early years and childcare provision is sorely missing from parades in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The most disadvantaged neighbourhood parades average 50% the number of extra-curricular childcare assets as the most affluent neighbourhoods, with a very clear link between provision across all deciles of deprivation.

Neighbourhood parades in the most disadvantaged areas have less social infrastructure, and more over-saturated retail and services

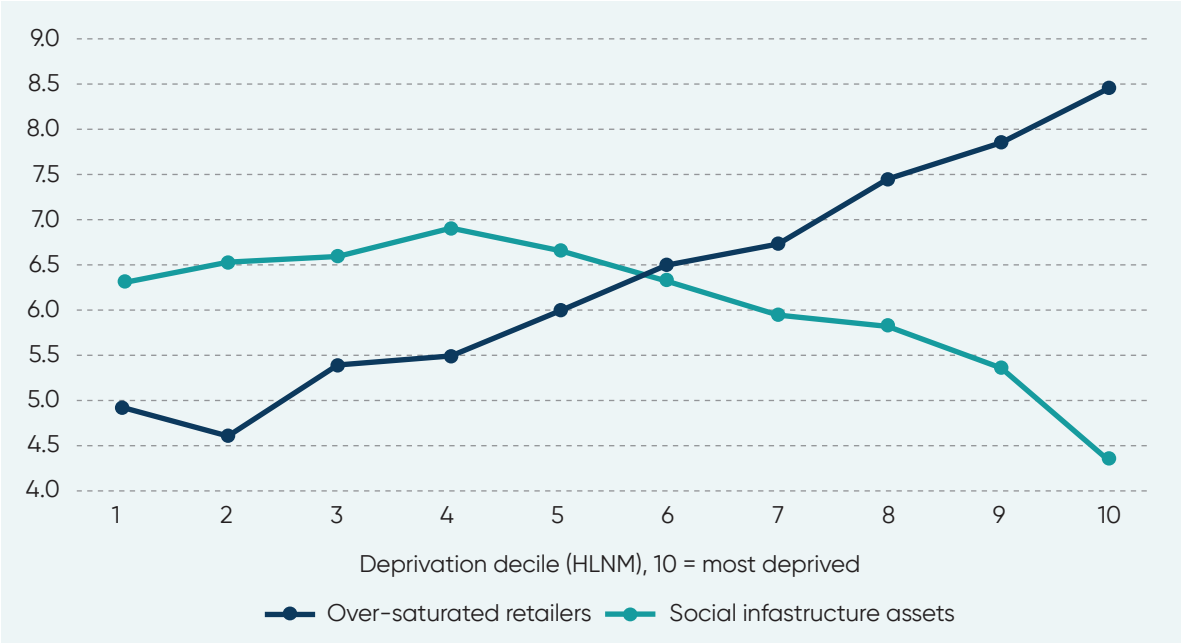
Social infrastructure is essential to the development of social capital, and nationally, neighbourhood parades are where much of our social infrastructure is based.

Yet our analysis suggests this does not always hold up in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. As Figure 3 shows, neighbourhoods with higher levels of deprivation tend to have a lower density of social infrastructure assets on their parade, with the 10% most affluent neighbourhoods having an average of 6.4 assets, compared to 4.4 in the 10% most disadvantaged.

The amenities that form our definition of social infrastructure here are a mixture of some of the categories seen in Section 1 and are driven by what's available in the data. We include pubs, coffee shops, cafés, community centres, advice centres, social clubs, private clubs, village halls, snooker halls, bingo halls, GPs, leisure centres and swimming pools, health clubs, and sport clubs.

Instead, parades in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are dominated by commercial uses that have been characterised in popular media as providing more limited social value, with a far higher density of things such as takeaways, bookmakers, vaping stores and off licenses (on average 8.5 in the 10% most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, compared to 4.9 in the most affluent ones). As will be discussed, it isn't necessarily the inherent existence of these outlets but their proliferation that drives the perception of social disamenity, alongside the loss of culturally recognisable social anchors.

Figure 3: Average number of social infrastructure assets and over-saturated retail units and services per neighbourhood (Middle Super Output Area), local parades only.



Source: Hyper Local Needs Index (2025), Green Street (2025), ICON Analysis

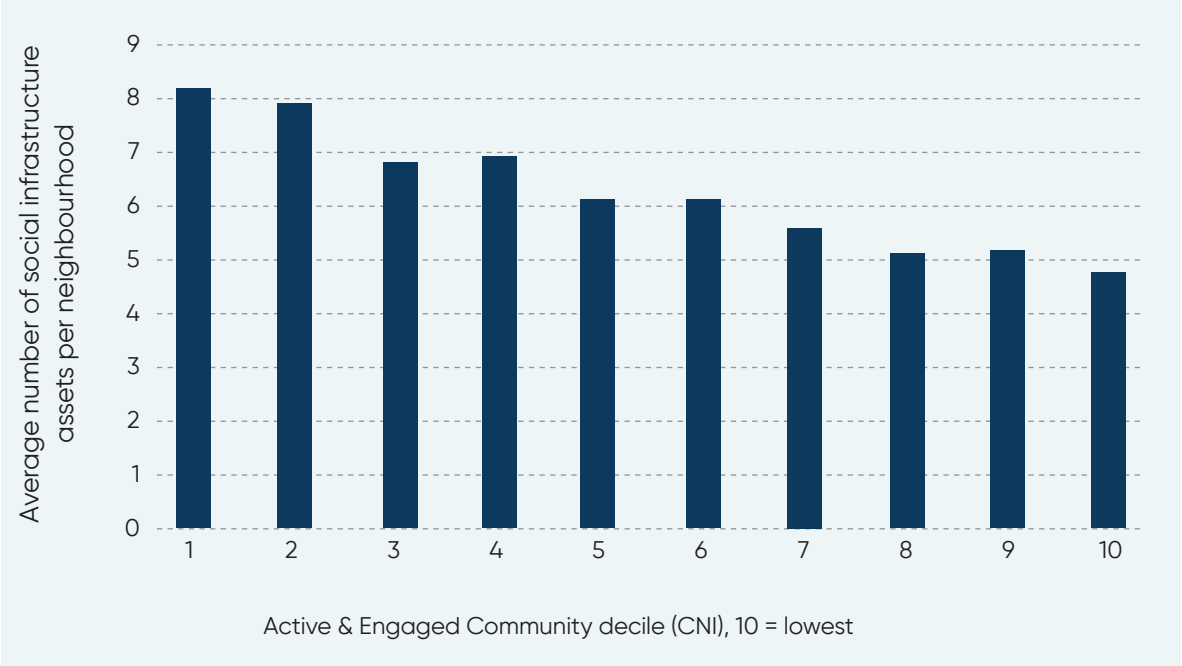
Neighbourhoods with more social infrastructure also tend to experience much higher levels of civic participation and social trust

Social infrastructure plays a crucial role in helping people feel a stake in their community and confidence in the systems that serve them. Where those foundations are weak, trust, connection, and collective purpose are harder to sustain.

We see this in the data. As Figure 4 shows, there is a clear relationship between neighbourhoods with a lower density of social infrastructure assets in the local parade also being those with the lowest levels of civic participation and civic activity, as measured by the 'Active and Engaged Community' score on the Community Needs Index.[8] The Active and Engaged Community domain of the Community Needs Index includes civic participation, neighbourhood cohesion, social trust, short-term population turnover, and the number of third-sector organisations, grant funding, and small businesses.

In short, this is a good proxy for the strength of social capital. While the direction of causality is unclear, the relationship is almost certainly mutual and likely two-way: stronger networks of civic activity help sustain local institutions, while those institutions help cultivate the trust and shared identity that brings communities together.

Figure 4: Average number of social infrastructure assets per neighbourhood, for each decile of the 'Active & Engaged Community' domain of the Community Needs Index



Source: Community Needs Index (2023), Green Street (2025), ICON Analysis

Parades in disadvantaged neighbourhoods have far less informal spaces to meet and foster social connection

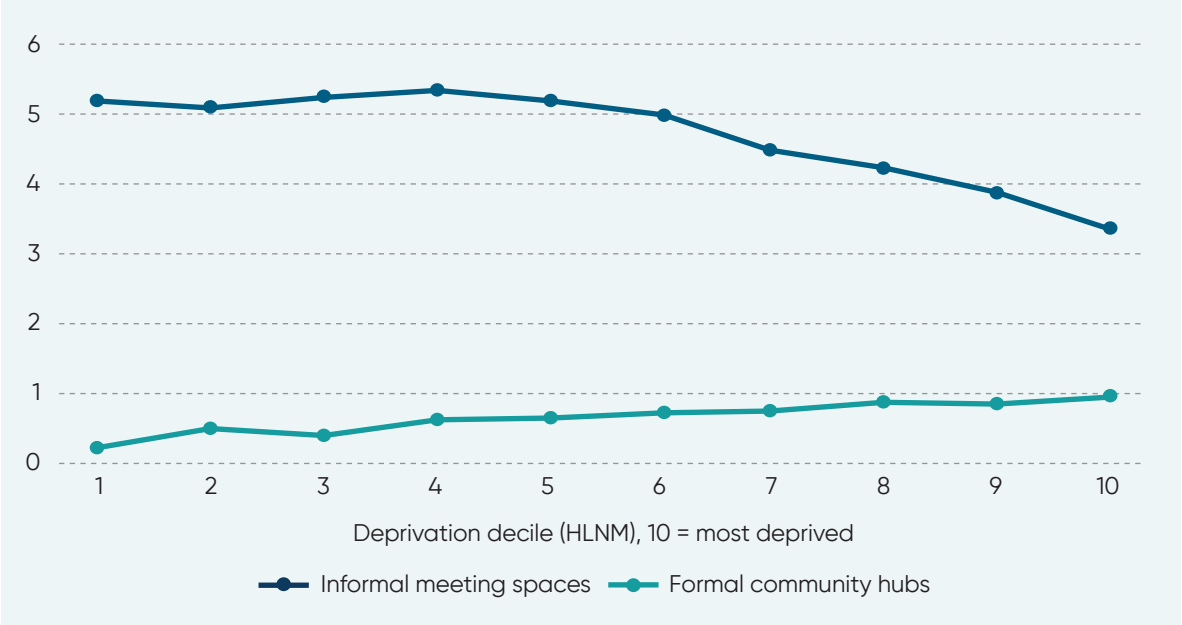
We have established that deprived neighbourhoods have less social infrastructure overall. But a closer look shows that where it does exist, as Figure 5 shows, assets are disproportionately formal – i.e. community centres, advice centres, village halls, and social clubs sustained by the VCSE and public sectors. Their role often extends beyond sociability - providing structured activities, advice, or basic support that help residents manage daily challenges.

8 Finlay et al., (2019, October), Closure of 'Third Places'? Exploring Potential Consequences for Collective Health and Wellbeing, Health Place, 60, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2019.102225

As a result, social spaces in deprived neighbourhoods tend to be more service-oriented, designed to meet need rather than simply to host casual, social interaction. In contrast, in more affluent areas, third spaces are both more numerous and overwhelmingly informal—pubs, cafés, coffee shops, snooker halls and bingo halls that are privately run, commercially self-sustaining, and geared toward leisure rather than support.

This list of included businesses is guided by the availability of data and is not an exhaustive list of spaces that promote informal sociability. However, the stark contrast shown in the data suggests that these are an effective proxy for general availability of third spaces.

Figure 5: Average number of informal meeting spaces and formal community hubs per neighbourhood, local parades only



Source: Hyper Local Needs Index (2025), Green Street (2025), ICON analysis

Formal and informal spaces: a theory of change

An effective 'ecosystem' of social infrastructure depends on synergies between different types of assets. Supporting formal community spaces is crucial but doing so in isolation, without comprehensive support for communities to foster all forms of social infrastructure including informal spaces, will result in limited progress building social capital.

Trust, belonging, and pride in place are also built in the everyday "third spaces" where people meet one another and socialise. These places do more than provide leisure or convenience: they create the routines, relationships, and shared reference points that give a neighbourhood its sense of collective identity. Without spaces for people to meet socially, residents have fewer opportunities to build relationships, share experiences, or feel they have a stake in the place that they live.

The result is a slow drift toward social isolation and exclusion – people retreat further into private spaces, and trust in neighbours and institutions begins to fray.[9] Over time, this weakens the informal networks that sustain resilience and participation, leaving civic life thinner and communities less able to act together or feel represented in the systems that shape their lives.[10]

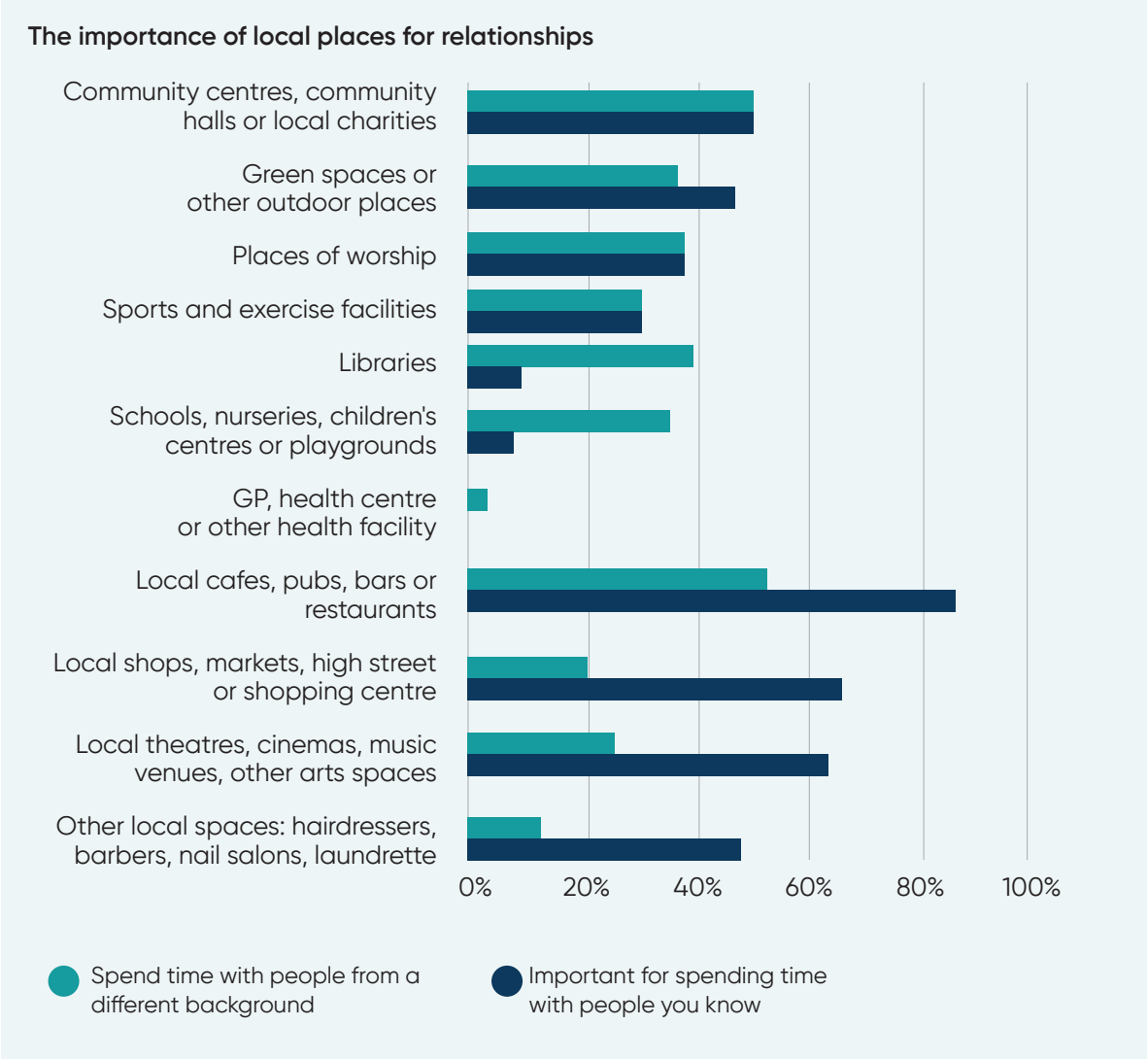
9 Finlay et al., (2019, October), Closure of 'Third Places'? Exploring Potential Consequences for Collective Health and Wellbeing, Health Place, 60, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2019.102225

10 Wilson et al., (2023), A Social Capital Approach to Understanding Community Resilience during the Covid-19 Pandemic, Forum Community Psychology, https://knowledge.lancashire.ac.uk/id/eprint/47077/1/Wilson%20et%20al%20(2023)_A%20Social%20Capital%20Approach%20to%20Understanding%20Community%20Resilience%20during%20the%20Covid-19%20Pandemic.pdf

This is supported by research from the GLA that shows that 'the most important places for meeting people you know' are primarily informal spaces (local cafes, pubs, bars or restaurants, and local shops, markets, high streets, or shopping centres). The most important places for 'meeting people from other backgrounds' also include a mixture of formal spaces (community centres, places of worship) and informal spaces (local cafes, pubs, bars or restaurants, green spaces).

Informal spaces help to knit communities together, raising the frequency and depth of interaction between people of similar and different backgrounds, which is crucial in bringing about greater involvement in civic, social and economic life.

Figure 6: The importance of various forms of social infrastructure for relationships (GLA, 2020)[11]



11 Greater London Authority (2020), 'Connective Social Infrastructure'.

ICON commissioned Popular to research five case studies of neighbourhood renewal, focusing on distressed or disadvantaged areas. In all five of the case studies, transformation has required leaders of both formal (e.g. VCSE anchors) and informal (e.g. independent traders) institutions to combine, using a mixture of 'hard spaces' (bricks and mortar) and 'soft spaces' (such as local WhatsApp groups) to stitch the social fabric together.

We find from our case studies a short, simplified list of distinctive functions between formal and informal spaces, institutions and networks:

Formal:

- Ability to raise funding from external sources
- Connection to formal services and institutions
- Professional capacity to deliver targeted events and activities

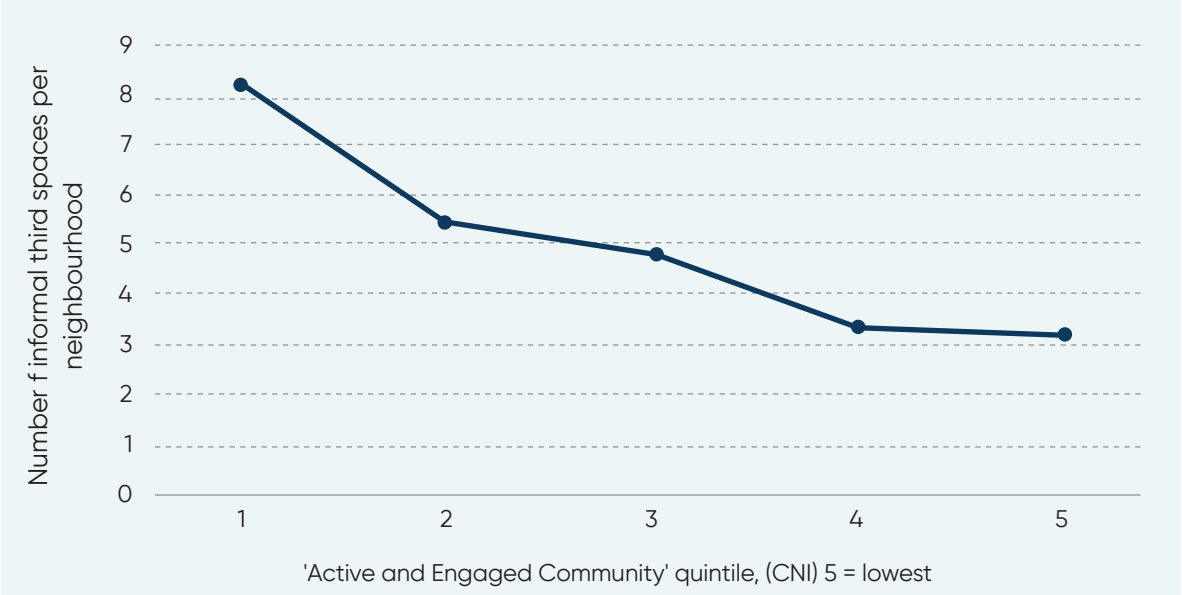
Informal:

- Highly representative of local demographics, creating welcome spaces for those that may prefer not to use formal community services
- Strong 'word of mouth' effect which is helpful for informal spread of information
- Major centre of gravity, forming recognisable local landmarks, clusters and hubs of activity

Formal spaces and networks often hold the levers, funding and institutional knowledge, which means that they have the most potential to intervene and instigate change. However, they are far fewer in number than informal spaces, which form a key element of the 'glue' in a community. Informal spaces i) connect to the fabric of the resident population, driving participation and connectivity in ways that formal spaces can't always, and ii) attract footfall in to local hubs, improving engagement with other activities that are co-located, contributing to more vibrant places. Additionally, more "service-oriented" formal assets can sometimes reproduce top-down relationships - things being done "for" community, as opposed to the community organically creating and gravitating towards its own preferred spaces and places, which is usually true of informal spaces.

This is perhaps most evident in Figure 7, which organises the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in England by the number of third spaces on their neighbourhood parade, and their 'Active and Engaged Community' score. We find disadvantaged neighbourhoods with less third spaces typically also show lower levels of civic engagement.

Figure 7: Average number of third spaces and strength of 'Active and Engaged Community', most deprived 20% of neighbourhood parades only



Source: Community Needs Index (2023), Green Street (2025), ICON Analysis

Attempts to rebuild communities relying on formally governed activity alone will be insufficient - policymakers need to pursue the promotion of both formally managed community activity (such as community centres) and informal spaces (such as café's and pubs). Our policy section discusses how avenues for doing so revolve around strengthening the long-term funding and capacity of communities to carry out more intentioned place shaping activity, whilst removing barriers for local traders, community owned businesses and social enterprises.

Disadvantaged neighbourhoods tend to have more formal health services on the parade, but lack many of the other amenities necessary for living a healthy life

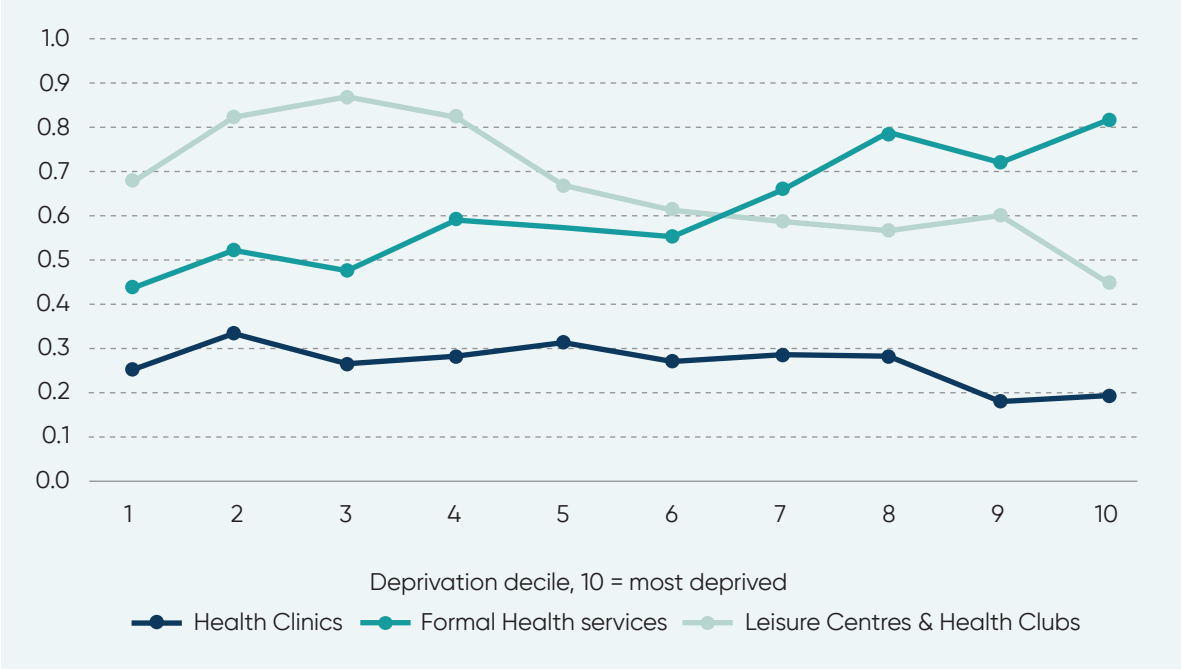
Many of the institutions that promote social connection are also the ones that support good health. In fact, only a small percentage of our overall health is determined by the health service, while the physical environment, social and economic factors, and our own behaviours determine the rest.[12]

Places with accessible sports clubs, gyms, parks, or fitness groups tend to promote both physical wellbeing and social connections.[13] Such places are genuinely healthier in the truest meaning of the word – sports facilities and clubs draw people together around a shared activity, thereby developing new social connections that reinforce healthier habits.

But when it comes to health infrastructure, affluent and disadvantaged neighbourhoods are almost mirror images of each other.

As Figure 8 shows, affluent areas have a far higher density of leisure centres and health clubs (gyms, fitness studios, spas, wellness centres) and health clinics (e.g. physiotherapists, osteopaths) than they do formal health services such as GP surgeries or NHS health centres. The opposite is true in disadvantaged areas: formal health provision is more visible on the parade, yet the informal, preventative spaces that help people stay active and connected are much scarcer.

Figure 8: Average number of health-supporting amenities per neighbourhood, local parades only



Source: Hyper Local Needs Index (2025), Green Street (2025), ICON analysis

12 Krelle et al., (2024, January), How do people estimate the contribution health care makes to our health?, The Health Foundation, https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/blogs/estimate-contribution-healthcare-to-health#:~:text=The%20jobs%20we%20do%2C%20the,wellbeing%20are%20often%20not%20considered

13 Grunseit et al., (2020, December), Evidence on the reach and impact of the social physical activity phenomenon parkrun: A scoping review, Preventive Medicine Reports, 20, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2020.101231

Health outcomes follow the same lines as social ones. Higher levels of trust in neighbours, reciprocity between neighbours, organisational membership and strong social support are all associated with better health outcomes, with stronger associations in more deprived areas.[14]

It is certainly a positive that parades in deprived neighbourhoods have a stronger formal health service presence. But this only supports good population health up to a point. Parades may host a GP surgery, but in the absence of institutions and clubs that enable a healthy lifestyle more generally, pressure on frontline health services will continue.

Another area where we see this is on food: Figure 9 shows that the most deprived quintile of neighbourhood parades average 11 unhealthy food retailers per capita and 5 healthy food retailers per capita, whilst the most affluent quintile of neighbourhood parades average 7.4 unhealthy food retailers per capital and 5.8 healthy food retailers per capita.[15]

Figure 9: Average number of healthy and unhealthy food retailers per capita, local neighbourhood parades only

Source: Green Street (2025), ICON analysis

The ratio of local healthy and unhealthy food options matters; evidence suggests that reducing the availability of unhealthy food options could have similar levels of impact on health as increasing access to healthy options.[16] More isolated, deprived areas are often hit by a dual effect: the main grocery options on the parade are small convenience stores and off licenses, which charge higher prices due to a lack of alternatives and limited transport links.[17] This is an issue we have seen identified and addressed on our own visits. One of the first priorities of Ambition Lawrence Weston, the Big Local serving the Lawrence Weston estate in Bristol, was to try and draw a major budget supermarket to set up on their estate, amid resident concerns about the lack of quality food retailers in the area who were charging a premium for the lack of options available locally.

14 Coutts, Xia and Wang, (2025, February), Social Capital 2025: Reinforcing the bedrocks of the nation's health, Demos, https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Social-Capital-2025_Health-Paper_Feb-2025-1.pdf

15 Unhealthy retailers: fast food takeaways, small convenience stores (largely selling longlife food). health and wellness product stores.

16 Briazu et al., (2024), Barriers and facilitators to healthy eating in disadvantaged adults living in the UK: a scoping review, BMC Public Health, https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-19259-2

17 Cadavid-Gomez et al., (2025, April), Corner stores as community hubs: a systematic review of public health, economic impact, and social dynamics in urban areas, Frontiers in Nutrition, doi: 10.3389/fnut.2025.1526594

Figure 10: A framed Lidl shopping bag and receipt on the wall of Ambition Lawrence Weston, to celebrate their achievement in drawing a major budget supermarket chain to their estate

Source: Authors' own image

In Focus: Community food initiatives

Locally run community initiatives around food can make a marked difference in the dietary choices made by local residents, supporting healthier lifestyles and illness prevention.

In Hammersmith, for instance, the Nourish Hub rescues surplus food that would otherwise go to landfill and transforms it into £3 hot meals, alongside free cooking classes teaching seasonal, healthy recipes, using ingredients sourced from local shops and small supermarkets.

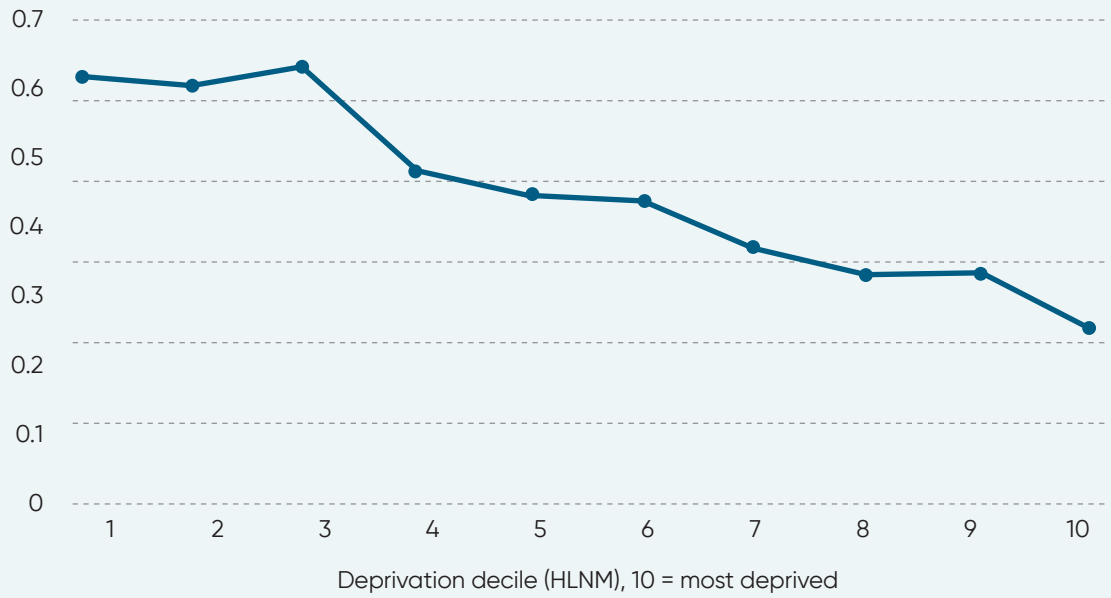
Across the country, ICON has seen similar initiatives rooted in trusted local networks. In Bristol, Ambition Lawrence Weston funds children's gardening and food-growing projects, while in St Oswald and Netherton, Liverpool, L30's Million runs free cooking courses delivered by community members already known and trusted by residents. This local leadership encourages participation and confidence, not only improving diets but also strengthening social ties and community resilience.

The availability of early years and childcare services is limited on the parades of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods

Alongside health services, another essential form of social infrastructure needed in every neighbourhood is high-quality childcare. It is essential for children's development - helping to build confidence, curiosity, and early learning. It is also vital for parents, providing them with networks of direct support to help them cope, share advice, and stay connected, while also enabling them to remain a part of the workplace. Much childcare provision exists on the neighbourhood parade as they are based in residential areas, which make them within "pram-pushing distance" for more households.[18]

Yet childcare provision is deeply unequal across the country. Nearly half (45%) of England can be classed as a "childcare desert", where there is a distinct lack of supply of provision relative to demand.[19] We find in our analysis that there is a significantly lower concentration of childcare provision on parades in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, versus more affluent ones. As Figure 11 shows, there is less than half the concentration of childcare services (Sure Start centres, nurseries and children's centres) in the 10% most disadvantaged neighbourhood parades versus the 10% least disadvantaged.

Figure 11: Average number of childcare assets per neighbourhood, local parades only



18 "Pram pushing distance" was an informal guideline introduced for the establishment of Sure Start in the late 1990s. While it is not official guidance now for modern childcare services, it remains a helpful way of understanding how childcare provision is targeted spatially.

19 Victoria University Melbourne Australia, (2024, September 12), England is one of the worst countries in Europe for access to childcare), https://www.vu.edu.au/about-vu/news-events/news/england-is-one-of-the-worst-countries-in-europe-for-access-to-childcare

Chapter 3 - Broken parades: how parades in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are falling short of their purpose

The high street is not a historic artefact. High streets have always evolved, adapting to changes in consumer habits and the wider economy. The rise of out-of-town retail parks and shopping centres in the 1980s and 1990s, and the more recent rise of the online economy, have pulled footfall and investment away from local high streets. They are continuing to change. Much has been written, for instance, about the need for town and city centres to move beyond traditional retail and instead pivot towards leisure, hospitality, and experience-based activities.[20]

One other characteristic of high street change is that many have become clones of one another, often lacking diversity in their offer, with more of the same chains dominating. The New Economics Foundation report on Clone Towns is one of the most recognisable works to characterise the trend of high streets "losing their character", with high streets the country looking and feeling much the same.[21] This convergence is not just aesthetic but functional: many high streets now operate below their potential, stripped back to the most basic retail uses and cut off from the wider economic and civic purposes they could serve.

Since much of the literature on high streets has focused on major high streets, town and city centres, little work has been done to understand whether neighbourhood parades are becoming clones of one and other, and if so, what types of offer they are converging around. This question is particularly important given that neighbourhoods serve a distinct role in sustaining local access to social infrastructure.

Our analysis suggests that not only are parades in disadvantaged neighbourhoods not fulfilling their social and civic functions effectively, but also that they are becoming more homogenous, which reduces their value.

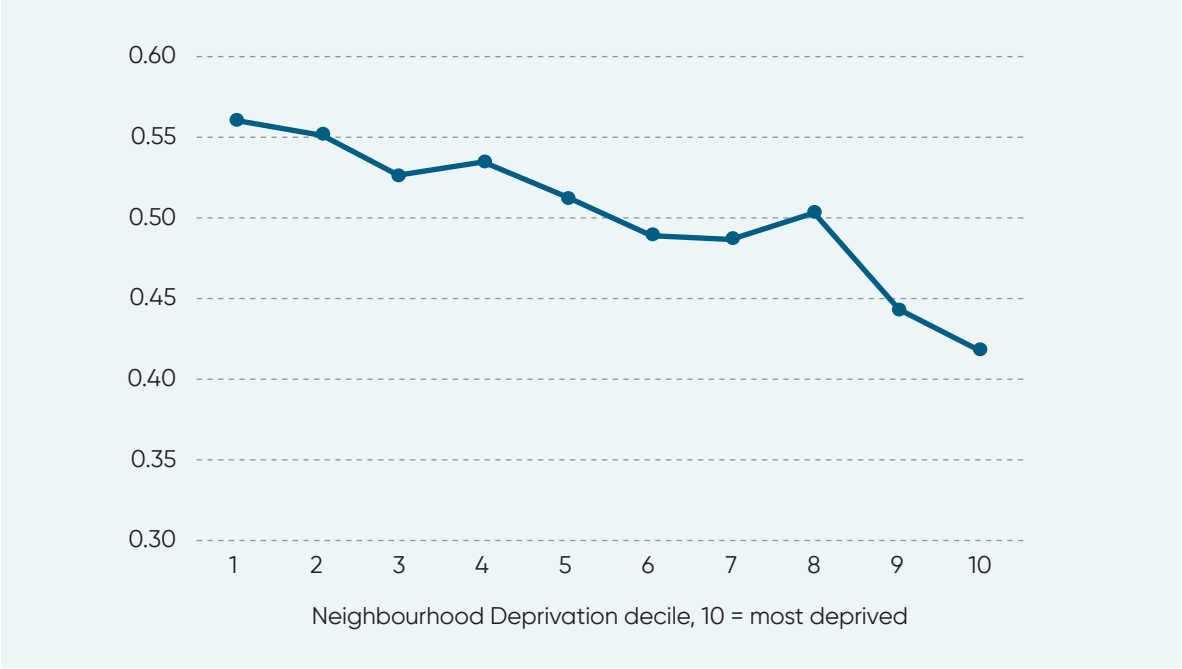
We see this in three parts of the data.

In the first, we have created a new neighbourhood parade "variety" measure, which captures how diverse and well-balanced the mix of uses is within each neighbourhood parade. In other words, it shows whether it has a broad spread of different types of retail, commercial, and social facilities rather than being dominated by just a few.[22] This measure acts as a proxy measure of the extent to which local parades provide choice to households, and play multiple community functions, as hubs of commerce, spaces and services.

In it, we find a clear pattern: neighbourhood parades in more affluent areas tend to be far more complex, offering a richer and more diverse mix of uses and facilities. In contrast, those in more deprived areas are typically much simpler, tend to be dominated by a narrow range of outlets, and lacking the diversity of amenities that affluent neighbourhoods benefit from.

20 Vicky Payne and David Rudlin (2024), High Street: How our town centres can bounce back from the retail crisis.
21 New Economics Foundation, (2004), Clone town Britain, https://new-economicsf.files.svdcdn.com/production/files/1733ceec8041a9de5e_ubm6b6t6i.pdf
22 The measure is a composite index combining two measures: how many different types of unit are represented (variety), and how evenly those types are distributed (balance).

Figure 12: Variety score of England's neighbourhood parades, by deprivation decile. A larger score indicates stronger variety.

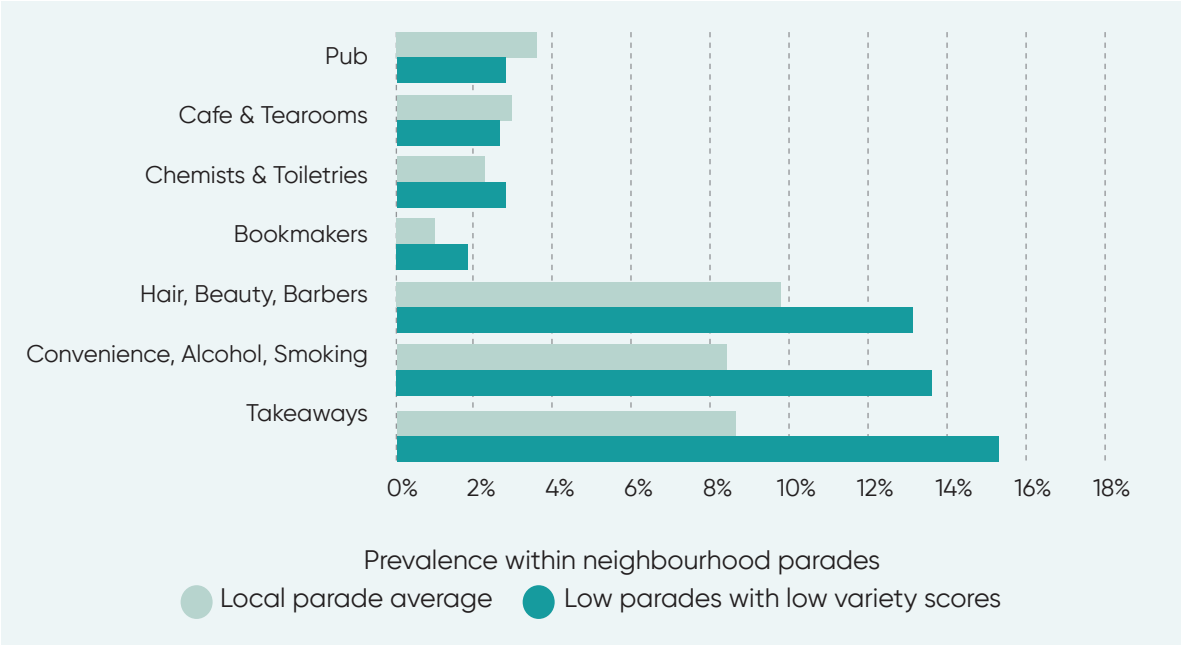


Source: Hyper Local Needs Index (2025), Green Street (2025), ICON analysis

As a second point, we reflected on what makes up the parades of disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Figure 13 compares the average local parade and the 500 parades with the weakest variety scores. We find that the more homogenous parades have nearly twice as many takeaways and betting shops as a share of all units compared to the national average, alongside higher numbers of convenience stores, tobacconists, and vape shops. Together, they have become emblematic of high-street decline in the public imagination, and are among the premises that new powers in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill aim to restrict.

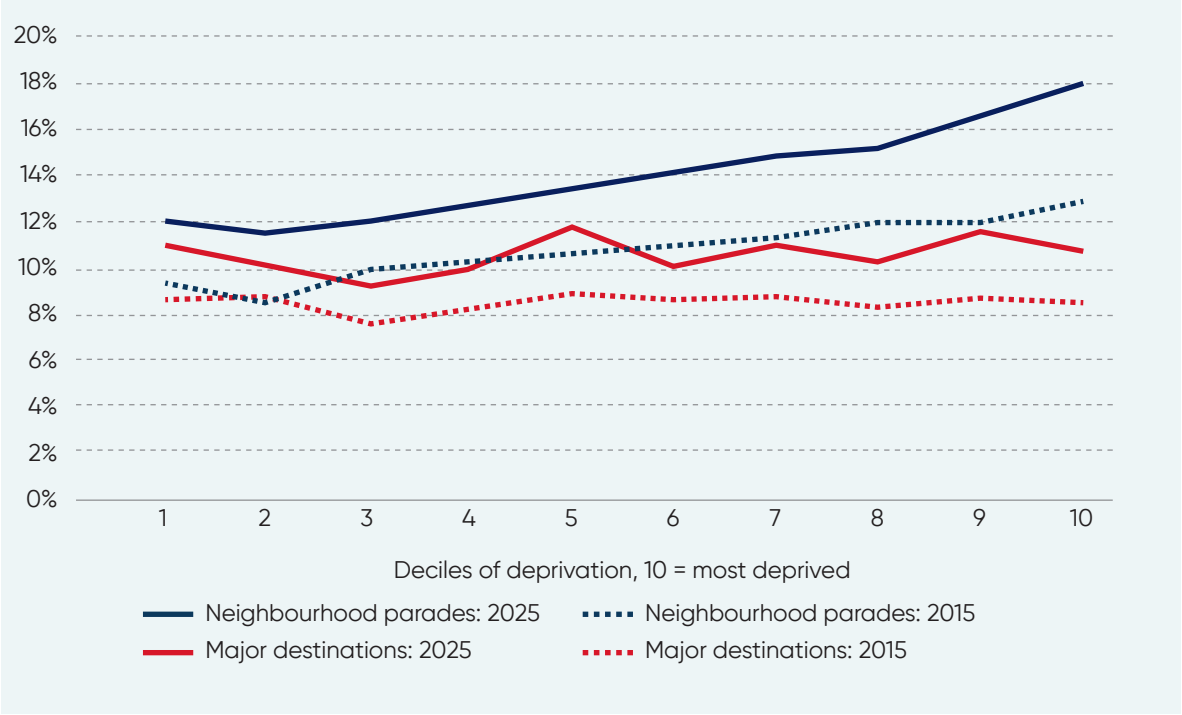
Figure 13: Average proportion of all local parades that are made up by selected common types of units: low variety local parades (darker blue) and the local parade average (lighter blue)



Source: Green Street (2025), ICON analysis

Thirdly, we observe that much of the growth in over-saturated convenience and consumption uses has occurred in the most deprived areas, particularly on their neighbourhood parade. Takeaways, off-licences, bookmakers, vape shops, and barbers have all expanded most rapidly in these locations. As Figure 14 shows, such premises have expanded the quickest in deprived neighbourhood parades, despite starting at a higher base. They now make up around 18% of all units on parades in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, growing by 6 percentage points since 2015. This compares with around 11% in the least disadvantaged parades, growing by 2 percentage points since 2015. We can also see the level and growth rate of these premises as a share of all units is worse in neighbourhood parades than in major destinations.

Figure 14: Proportion of neighbourhood parades and town centres that are made up by a group of the over-saturated retail[23]; 2015 and 2025.



Source: Hyper Local Needs Index (2025), Green Street (2025), ICON analysis

The problems we present here are compounded by the prevalence of shut shops. The 10% most deprived neighbourhood parades currently experience a vacancy rate of 8.1%, compared to 5.9% in the most affluent neighbourhood parades. To summarise, it is clear that the overall retail and social offer is far weaker in the most disadvantaged parades, where improvements in social capital are needed the most.

23 Takeaways, off-licences, bookmakers, vape shops, and barbers

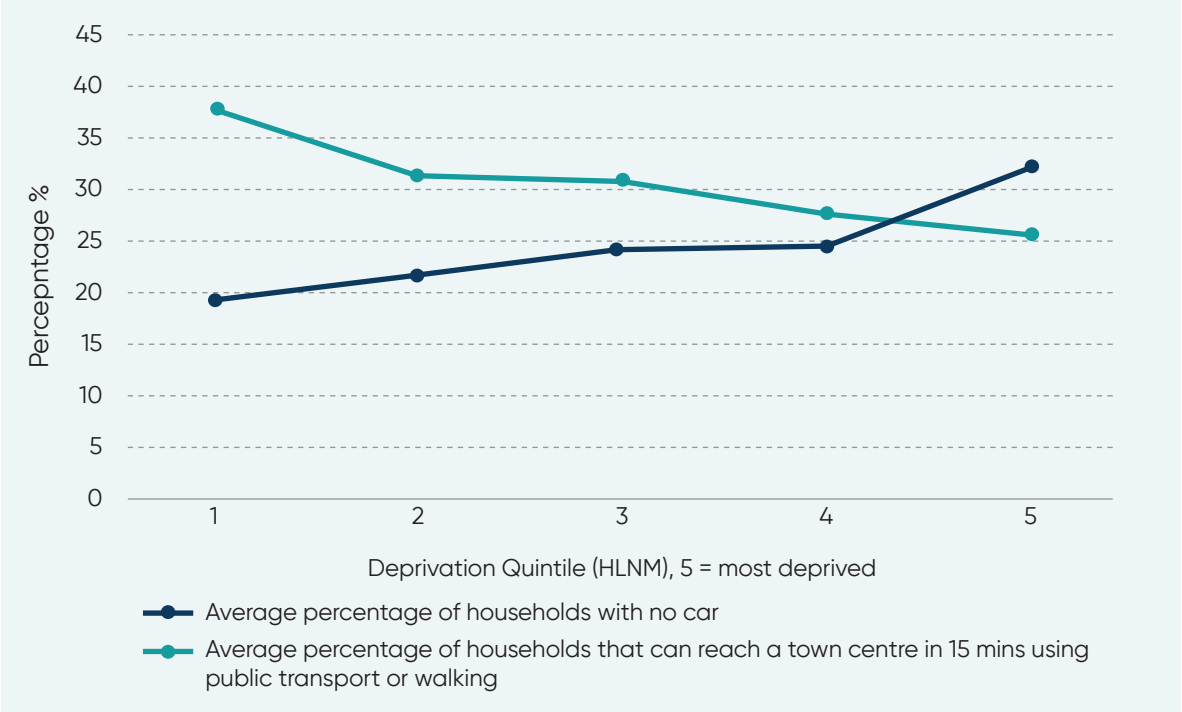
Residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods are more isolated from major town and city centres – making them more reliant on their neighbourhood parade, whatever it offers

Weaker social infrastructure matters even more in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, not just because people are less likely to be able to fall back on economic resource, but because their residents tend to be more bound to their local neighbourhood parade by geography

Less people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods own a car. Often this is substantially less, even regardless of geography – in rural areas and small towns, the share of households without a car is around 2.5x higher in the most deprived neighbourhoods versus the most affluent ones (20% versus 8%[24]). Nationally, around a third of households in the most disadvantaged areas do not have a car – compared to less than a fifth in the least disadvantaged.[25]

Figure 15 shows that it is not just private transport but also public transport options that are more limited in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Nearly 40% of households in the most affluent neighbourhood parades can access their town or city centre within 15 minutes using either public transport or walking, compared to around a quarter in the most disadvantaged areas.

Figure 15: Local parades only - percentage of households without a car and percentage able to reach a town centre within 15 minutes by public transport or walking

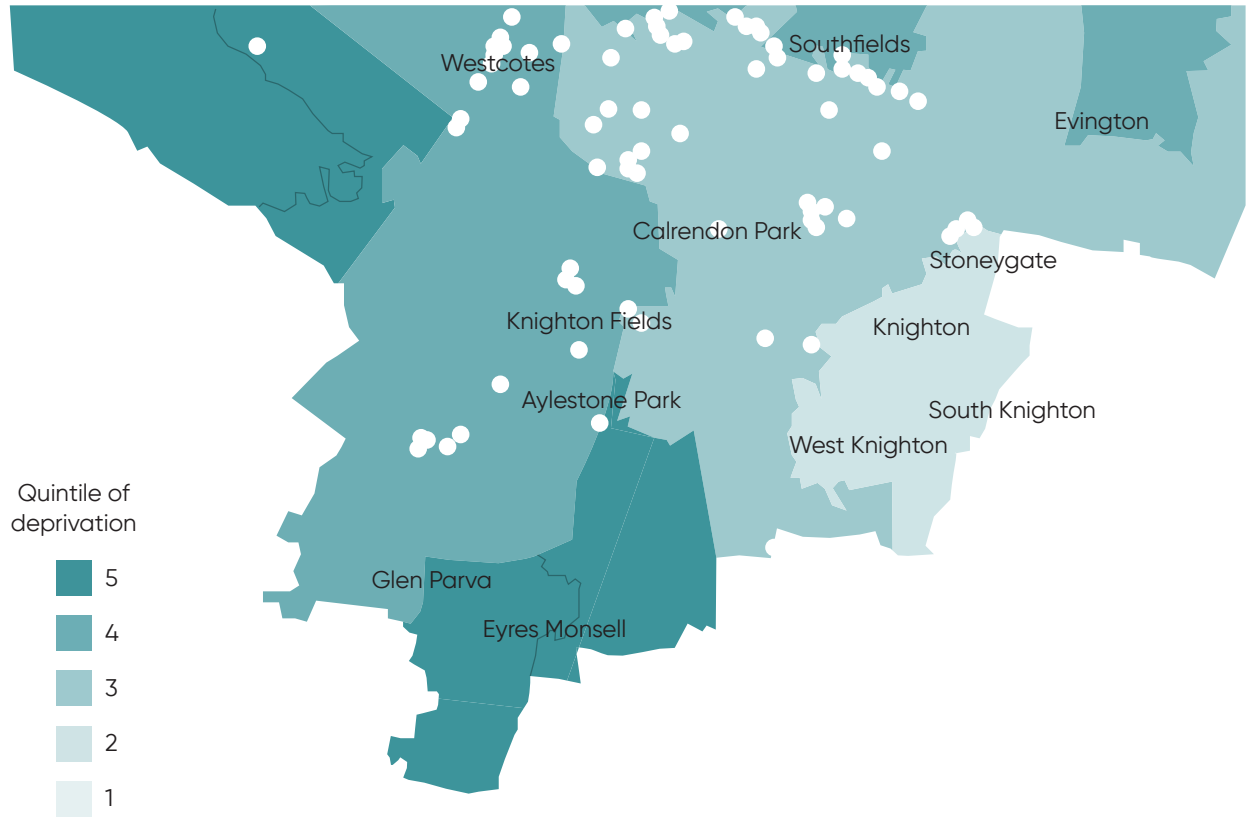


Source: Journey time statistics, Office for National Statistics (2019), Hyper Local Needs Index (2025), ICON analysis

What this means is that there are hundreds of neighbourhoods across the country that experience high income deprivation, transport-driven isolation, and few social infrastructure assets. These places are not necessarily confined to the hinterlands of the country – many are located in the outskirts of our major cities, such as the example given of Leicester below.

24 Census: Car or van availability, Office for National Statistics
25 Census: Car or van availability, Office for National Statistics

Figure 16: Shortage of selected social assets in low-income neighbourhoods on the outskirts of South Leicester. White dots = selected social assets.



Source: Green Street (2025), ICON analysis

Selected social assets are advice centres, bingo halls, café's, coffee shops, community centres/halls, health clubs, leisure centres, private clubs, pubs, snooker halls, and social clubs

Purpose restored: Policy implications and recommendations for reconstructing the nation's parades

Rationale for change

Our analysis shows that neighbourhood parades are vital social hubs for communities, and are home to essential local goods, services, spaces and institutions, supporting and connecting people in ways that district centres don't.

But there are stark inequalities in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. **We see two key areas of challenge in neighbourhood parades:**

1) **Their local parades have significantly less social infrastructure in many of its forms.** This reflects a large disparity in the availability of social places for people to meet, alongside the growing dominance of over-saturated retail such as off licenses, takeaways, betting shops, and vape shops. The core social function we see being fulfilled on the local parades of more affluent areas is less recognisable in the most deprived areas. This struggle is closely associated with the broader lack of social capital – with far lower levels of civic engagement and activity in areas with less social infrastructure - and lower skills, productivity and employment. We suspect this is a mutual relationship – a reinforcing cycle of poor economic conditions, lack of social infrastructure, disengagement in civic life, and dilapidation of the public realm.

2) **Local parades in disadvantaged areas also have far less health-promoting amenities,** including gyms, leisure centres, swimming pools and spas, specialist wellness and physiotherapy clinics. The availability of unhealthy food far outweighs the availability of healthy food, and health-reducing assets such as gambling, alcohol and smoking have proliferated. The neighbourhoods that lack these assets also have far worse health outcomes than elsewhere in the country. On our visits around the country, we have seen the prevalence of health issues that drive poor outcomes – such as obesity, Musculo-skeletal conditions, respiratory issues, and mental health problems.

We also know that people in deprived areas tend to be far more reliant on local parades due to geographic isolation and poorer transport options, compounding these problems.

The headwinds impacting neighbourhoods

Neighbourhood parades are this way because there has been very little answer to the economic circumstances that have shaped them. The proliferation of online retail, ubiquity of car transportation and out of town shopping, supply chain issues, and wider cost of living crisis have reduced the viability of local businesses and charitable enterprises.[26]

26 Vicky Payne and David Rudlin (2024), High Street: How our town centres can bounce back from the retail crisis.

There are longstanding accountability issues, rooted in the fact that local parades are not administrative geographies. Property ownership is fragmented between institutional investors and legacy estates, and local authorities often lack the power, funds, or legal pathways to enact serious intervention.

Whilst the withdrawal of local services around childcare and health too has further swept away key local anchors, the complexities of public service reform and local government reorganisation leave open question marks about the governance of neighbourhoods. The pinch to people's pockets dampens spending power, whilst local authority finances remain in crisis.

There has not been enough focused, joined-up policy to protect and restore social infrastructure on neighbourhood parades, with:

i) Regeneration investment largely flowing to city and town centres

ii) The imposition of overly specified piecemeal projects that do not enable local places to build up the experience of driving their own change

iii) The responsibility for neighbourhoods thinking fragmented across many government departments – ICON analysis suggests as many as 13 departments are delivering neighbourhood-level programmes. This also applies to health-promoting amenities, too; in another example, research suggests as many as 16 departments have responsibilities over healthy food[27]

It remains unclear whether Pride in Place will genuinely address the latter two points above.

But we must add to the momentum that has been growing. With the High Streets Task Force, a House of Lords Built Environment Committee Enquiry into High Streets and the Boosting Britain's High Streets Campaign, now is the time to ensure neighbourhood parades are not left out of this ambition.

Policy objective 1

The first key objective that we set for government is to foster greater curation and cultivation of social infrastructure in disadvantaged local parades, supporting local businesses and the social economy, promoting vibrancy, variety, and informal sociability.

The outcomes we believe government should be targeting in neighbourhood parades nationally include: increases in the number of private enterprises (both greater ability to attract chains, and better platforming for local entrepreneurs), growth in the number and influence of community organisations delivering formalised community services, improvements in civic activity such as events and footfall, and stronger social capital – the thickness of networks and cohesion between different groups.

The theory of change that informs our recommendations around curation and cultivation of neighbourhood parades is based on empowering local actors to take a more active role in place shaping.

Whether big or small, high streets are a very complicated topic. The lanes, parades and arcades that form our neighbourhood high streets are often rudderless – without a natural steward to manage and direct them through societal and technological transformation. But in its purest sense, the neighbourhood never changes. Residents will always want to see their area thrive - to connect to like-minded locals, to know their neighbours, to patronise local businesses, for buildings to gleam and sparkle – to have the grass mown, for the streets to be clean. This is why communities are best placed to step in to the collective action problem and take stronger roles as placemakers of their neighbourhood parades.

But people across even the most challenged areas of the country have illustrated that there are ways to create genuine change at a local level. Popular's strategies for renewing social infrastructure highlights that transformation is possible, when driven by a range of local people within communities taking initiative, galvanising local partners, and pooling together resources, drawing on existing strengths.

27 National Food Strategy, An Independent Review for Government (2021).

But we need to empower more communities to be able to do more of this. The High Streets Taskforce found the key barrier to local renewal was place-management capacity, with half of their locations lacking a partnership forum. Creating leaders, partnerships and networks was a major foundational intervention in places, laying the groundwork for innovation and inspiration.[28] Many of the regeneration programmes of recent years have delivered capital projects that focus on cosmetic upgrades to the built environment. We certainly believe these projects are much needed in deprived neighbourhoods. However, we look to move beyond the piecemeal nature of funding pots of the last few years - not imposing technocratic projects, but building capacity in places to take influence of their own transformation.

'Capacity building' can be an amorphous term: we propose a long-term commitment to places that fundamentally strengthens their power and capability to engage in active place shaping, reduces dependency on local political priorities to back individual projects, and fosters their ability to follow their own trajectories, growing in organic ways. Steps that involve capacity building are elaborated on below:

- Handing down agency to local players without imposing strict ringfencing and targets, building up trust between communities and delivery organisations
- Clearly understanding and building on what's already happening on the ground, platforming existing knowledge, talent, ideas, relationships
- Strengthening the relationships within communities to aid the pooling together of interests, expertise and resources, and matchmaking local providers and recipients
- Developing expertise and know-how in local authorities and community groups so they are able to make use of levers that involve capital spend (such as renovation, repurposing, purchasing of buildings)
- Revenue spend and building of expertise that supports the management of buildings and spaces
- Policy guidance that raises awareness to communities of existing levers, funders, resources and data available that may help the planning and execution of local decisions

So how might government bring about this change?

Policy recommendations

Capacity and decision-making

1. A front door service within or adjacent to central government, based on a "what works" model, that provides capacity support and guidance to Neighbourhood Boards, Local Authorities and other local actors working on high street renewal. This service would provide a few things:

   a) **A light-touch data & evaluation service** so everyone uses the same measures, helping to provide a simple baseline and track a small set of indicators. This helps prioritise action and builds wider learning by showing and sharing what works, issuing shared learning resources, toolkits, and expertise.

   b) **A simple playbook to make vital and vibrant centres**, including nominating Senior Responsible Officers in the Local Authority; constituting a neighbourhood governance structure; diagnosis; quick wins; measurement and communication of progress; longer term planning and strategic moves.

   c) **Convene a community of practice** so practitioners learn from each other. In the medium term, grow a pipeline (and include young people) through a Place Professional apprenticeship. This could be linked into other training programmes based around community organising and volunteering.

28 Parker, C, Barratt, J, Colledge, M, Davis, M, Graciotti, A, Kazakou, Afroditi Maria, Millington, Steve, Mumford, Christine, Ntounis, N, Roberts, G, Sewell, M and Steadman, C, 2025a, High Streets Task Force Post-Programme: Technical Data. Project Report. Manchester Metropolitan University. https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/639513/ (https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/639511/)

d) **Issue clear 'how to' policy guidance** for existing programmes and levers focussed at least in part on high streets e.g. Pride in Place, or other programmes including the Neighbourhood health Service and Best Start, and helping to deploy powers such as Rental Auctions and Compulsory Purchase Orders.

e) **Employ experienced 'neighbourhood link workers'** - practical mentors and subject-matter experts that mediate between the local, national and neighbourhood level, taking on community research and relationship management roles, helping to equip local leaders with know-how, fostering partnerships and networks, transferring learning back to government.

f) **Support Neighbourhood Boards and other local actors to embed social infrastructure as a core pillar** of their overall high street renewal plans. These groups should reflect the full mix of activity on a parade, treating it as a social space as much as a retail one, rather than giving undue weight to larger businesses. This could include supporting mapping community services across hard, soft, formal and informal social infrastructure, to identify gaps and potential routes to closing those gaps. Local areas should have clear guidance on how to involve residents and businesses in shaping plans - from structured engagement to door-to-door conversations that gather local insight and ideas.

g) **A dedicated focus on community ownership** as a way of securing social infrastructure on high streets where conventional commercial models have broken down. It should help Neighbourhood Boards and other local actors to identify vulnerable or strategic assets, assess when community ownership may be appropriate, and navigate the mix of powers and funding available – from the new Community Right to Buy to High Street Rental Auctions, through to specialist asset funds from large foundations. This support should cover business planning, blended finance, and governance models (including community land trusts and community benefit societies) so that assets are held in trust for local people, protect space for civic uses, and provide a stable platform for the wider social and economic renewal of local parades.

This service could sit either within a central government unit in Cabinet Office or MHCLG, or be part of an independent external agency – be it a new agency focused on neighbourhood renewal, or within an existing established organisations such as the Institute for Place Management.

Powers and levers

Popular's **Pride in Place, Part 2: Strategies for Renewing Neighbourhood Social Infrastructure**, commissioned by ICON, has highlighted several currently existing mechanisms by which communities can enact place shaping. This is a summary of those mechanisms – read about these in more detail **here.**[29]

The issue, however, is that these mechanisms are adopted only to a limited extent nationwide, owing to limited awareness, capacity, skills and financing. By improving place-management capacity and strategic thinking around social infrastructure, local leaders can be encouraged and empowered to increase the adoption of these levers:

1. **Community Asset Stewards:** This exists in practice but has not until now been conceptualised - it means community-led bodies that manage but do not own assets, for situations where community asset ownership is not realistic. 'Council-owned, community-run'-type partnerships exist where local organisations may be trusted to take on medium to long-term leases on other organisations' and landlords' owned assets. Tried and tested legal models include community benefit societies, community land trusts or community interest companies. Private landlords could also be incentivised to sign leases with Community Asset Stewards, following the example of Creative Land Trusts.

29 https://www.neighbourhoodscommission.org.uk/report/pride-in-parades-part-2/

2. Asset owners giving f**avourable conditions to fledgling businesses** (flexible leases, pop up opportunities, peppercorn rents, business incubation support), where there is a potential long-term commercial and/or philanthropic benefit.

3. Councils carrying out **Compulsory Purchase Orders and High Street Rental Auctions**. The low take up of these levers is directly related to limited capacity, skills and financing, although several early adopters are now setting up vacancy registers and 'HSRA zones' where the powers apply, which could be incorporated into wider community-led high street planning. The development of community-led visions strengthens the case for councils to adopt HSRAs and CPOs.

Popular have also called for a new power:

1. **Rollout of Super CIDs**. "Beefed-up" version of the Community Improvement Districts (CIDs) proposed and piloted by Power to Change : special economic zones in which different planning rules, rate relief structures and other incentives apply – such as rates relief, local suspension of permitted use rights, or a Community Right to Buy extension which further democratises the designation of Assets of Community Value. The incentive structure could be designed by a democratic community organisation, Neighbourhood Board or Community Asset Steward.

Policy objective 2

Our second objective for government is to improve health outcomes by increasing the provision of health-promoting assets and activities in disadvantaged neighbourhood parades.

The targets that we should be pursuing in the short term revolve around promoting healthy lifestyles – particularly the consumption of healthy foods, and regular physical activity and exercise. These are geared towards improving health outcomes in the long-run: obesity, heart disease, respiratory issues, and ultimately economic activity and healthy life expectancy.

These ideas aim to: i) increase the availability of 'lifestyle-improving' health amenities and activities that focus on prevention - diet, exercise, mental health - at a local level, and ii) embed formal health services more deeply into the places where people live, plugging them in to existing local activity, and taking a more proactive role around general lifestyle management.

Policy recommendations

Direct investments

1. **Start-up and conversion grants for vacant units:** targeted capital funding to help local entrepreneurs or social enterprises convert vacant premises into health and sports venues or healthy food outlets on disadvantaged parades, accompanied by resource funding and bespoke expertise that enables these organisations to navigate the complexity of leaseholds, valuations, and fragmented ownership.

2. **A new generation of community canteens:** low-cost, state-supported and cooperatively run canteens or cafés could be set up to offer nutritious meals at affordable prices, doubling as social hubs.[1] Whilst initiatives such as Free School Meals and The Healthy Start program have looked to increase access to existing sources of food via school canteen or supermarket voucher, this would bring affordable, healthy food into the neighbourhood.

Service delivery

1. **Neighbourhood Service Hubs:** small-scale multi-disciplinary service teams that act as a first point of prevention through regular interaction with people. These would be run by government employees – people working for various departments including DWP, NHS, DfE, DCMS. They would enable a holistic approach to service delivery focused on the neighbourhood level. These would also bring significant footfall to parades as well, benefitting nearby businesses and spaces.

This would be an opportunity to take a new neighbourhoods' approach to health services, focusing much more on 'soft interventions', embedding health into other parts of public service delivery, targeting lifestyle adjustments and long-term health management which could be around diet, physical exercise, help with addiction and substance use, mental health management.

One role these hubs could play is administering creative schemes that target the behavioural side of prevention. A recent trial in Tower Hamlets and Lambeth, where GPs and social prescribers administered fruit and vegetables to low-income residents with food-related health conditions, saw significant positive impacts on the health of participants.[30] The National Food Strategy has developed a 'Community Eatwell Program[31]' which follows this thinking.

Annex

Table X: Definitions of commercial and social activity

This is a set of bespoke categorisations subject to ICON analysis, which have been designed to capture the social, civic and cultural roles that various asset and services play.

Service	Included things
Convenience retail	Bakeries, Butchers, Newsagents, Conveniences stores, Delicatessens, Fishmongers, Greengrocers, Newsagents, Supermarkets, Vape Shops, Off Licenses
Social institutions	Advice Centres, Bingo Halls, Community Centres, Private Clubs, Village Halls, Snooker Halls, Pubs
Health & Leisure	Gyms, Spas, Health Clubs, Tennis Clubs, Martial Arts Clubs, Leisure Centres, Swimming Pools
Meeting & Eating	Café's, Coffee Shops, Restaurants, Ice Cream Parlours
Entertainment	Amusement Parks and Arcades, Bars, Sports Grounds, Bookmakers, Night Clubs, Bowling Alleys, Casinos, Function Rooms
The Arts	Art Galleries, Booksellers, Cinemas, Museums, Theaters, Concert Halls
Education services	Childcare (Nurseries, Learning Centres, Sure Start centres), Training Centres (e.g. Tuition, Music Schools)
Digital services	Libraries, Internet Café's
Health services	Chemists, GPs, Dentists, Health Centres, Health Clinics, Medical Centres, Hospitals
Financial services	Banks, Financial institutions, Financial Services, Building Societies, Credit Unions, Financial Advisors
Comparison retail	Most retail not included in convenience retail – e.g. shops selling furniture and household goods, electronics, clothes and shoes, motor vehicles, arts and music goods

30 For more on this, see: Alexandra Rose Charity, (2025) Fruit & veg on prescription, https://www.alexandrarose.org.uk/fruit-and-veg-on-prescription/
31 https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/ p153