

# PUBLIC GOOD IN THE HANDS OF THE PEOPLE

Examining the transformative potential and inherent risks of community-owned social infrastructure in post-industrial Northern towns.

Liz Edwards  
Liverpool Screen School

## WHAT IS SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE?

Spaces of public good including libraries, parks, lidos, pubs, youth clubs and community centres have historically been the physical cornerstones of encounter, tolerance and communing with others in our society. Conceptualised in the recent work of Klinenburt (2018) as social infrastructure, he offers the following definition:

"The physical places, and the organisations that have a physical plant... that shape our capacity to interact with one another", (Klinenburt, 2018)

-  **A** Library
-  **B** Lido
-  **C** Community Cafe
-  **D** Park
-  **E** Allotments
-  **F** Youth Centre

## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

These neighbourhood spaces enable people of all circumstance to encounter, tolerate and connect with each other, and, as Klinenburt's (2018) work demonstrated in the case of the 1990s Chicago heatwave, are central to community wellbeing and resilience, particularly in times of crisis.

## THE PROBLEM

Developments in the social landscape:



Widening social division



Increasing isolation



Increasingly digitalised interactions

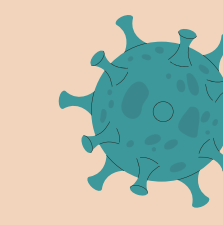
Social infrastructure threatened by:



Decade of austerity policy



Local authority budget cuts



COVID-19 pandemic

## RESEARCH NEED



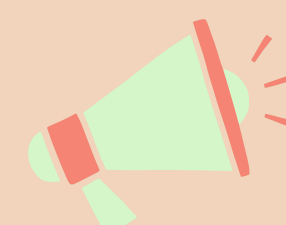
Limited academic enquiry, particularly in non-urban UK settings



Methodological gap - need for longitudinal in-depth empirical work



Growing political interest



Calls for further research (Latham & Layton, 2019)

## EMERGING POLICY & PRACTICE

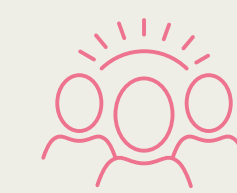
Recognition of impact on deprived communities:



Levelling up agenda



Towns / future high streets fund



Community ownership fund

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Social infrastructure (SI) | Community-ownership (CO)

- What is SI and how can it be defined and theorised?
- What role is SI playing in COVID-19 recovery and the wellbeing and resilience of Northern UK communities?

*Disproportionately affected by austerity and COVID*

- What are the benefits (social, cultural and economic) and challenges of community-owned SI?
- What are the distinctive features and conditions (external and internal) of effective community-owned social infrastructure?

- What are the lessons and policy imperatives from community-owned social infrastructure?

## METHODOLOGY

- Mixed methods design
- In-depth ethnographic approach



Case studies of community-owned social infrastructure sites



Participant as observer approach



Longitudinal study over a year-long period

Interviews & focus groups with organisational contacts & space users

## CASE STUDY SELECTION

- 60% of 'left behind' English neighbourhoods are located in the North (Local Trust/OCSI, 2019).
- Aim to address the spatial bias of dominant urban strategies
- Representations across normative social infrastructure organisational ownership models, including examples of both traditionally for-profit/private-owned spaces and publicly-owned venues.

EXAMPLES

BOOTLE

BIRKENHEAD

Traditional ownership model  
Publicly owned | For-profit



North Park Community Garden



Lock & Quay Community Pub & Gardens



Byrne Avenue Baths



Future Yard CIC

BOOTLE

BIRKENHEAD

