

FROM THE FRONTLINE – TACKLING REGIONAL INEQUALITIES FROM THE GROUND UP



St Vincent
de Paul Society

England and Wales

Turning Concern into Action

Contents

About the St Vincent de Paul Society (England and Wales)	3
Executive summary	4
Foreword by Jeannette Morgan, St Vincent's Wirral Centre Manager	5
Reflecting on the levelling up agenda	6
Raising the alarm - Skyrocketing demand for help	7
Key recommendations	8
From the frontline: The work of our centres and Conferences	13
• Revitalising communities – 'Smart Recovery' in Southend	14
• Community cohesion and reducing reoffending in Ely, Wales	16
• Food security – No levelling up without addressing food poverty	17
• Removing barriers to employment in the North East	19
• Manors project – Building resilient communities and a sense of belonging in Newcastle	20
• Digital poverty – Improving accessibility in North London	22
Conclusion	26

About the St Vincent de Paul Society (England and Wales)

The St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) was founded in 1833 and it was established in England and Wales in 1844. It is part of an international Christian voluntary network dedicated to tackling poverty in all its forms, and it offers help and support to those in need – irrespective of their faith, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, background or circumstances.

The SVP's mission is to unite people and communities. It seeks and finds those in need, and it provides practical support and fellowship in a spirit of justice, whilst tackling the causes of poverty. It works closely with individuals and communities in some of the most deprived areas in England and Wales to develop and implement local solutions and help lift people out of poverty.

The SVP numbers around 800,000 voluntary members in some 153 countries, with 8,500 members in England and Wales. The work of the Society continues to evolve but remains person-centred, where everyone has the right to be a valued member of the community in which they live.

The SVP is committed to social justice issues and its work in this area is a central aspect of the Society's vision and mission. It advocates and campaigns for those suffering from poverty, hardship and discrimination by collecting, interpreting and sharing evidence from its frontline services across England and Wales and informing and influencing policies, practice and public opinion.



Executive Summary

Poverty does not affect everyone equally. It is structural and influenced by demographics and geography and impacts people on the margins of society in different ways. Since being initially set out in the 2019 Conservative Party's election manifesto, the term "levelling up" has been at the centre of the government's policy agenda. Broadly, the agenda to tackle regional inequalities acknowledges that "...not everyone shares equally in the UK's success. While talent is spread equally across our country, opportunity is not. Levelling up is a mission to challenge, and change, that unfairness" (HM Government Whitepaper, 2022). The SVP is passionate about addressing this inequality, which is why we have published this report.

With the debate and language around regional inequalities ever-changing, whether the term "levelling-up" is used or not, the aspiration to address regional inequalities is still important and should be a priority for the current and any future government. Recently, the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act, which received Royal Assent in October 2023 did embed some of the missions into statute, however it still does not go far enough to provide tangible and measurable objectives to achieve this ambitious mission.

In this report, we shed a light on how the SVP has long been levelling up. We publish this report as we celebrate our 180th anniversary, and at a pivotal moment as we continue to grapple with a cost of living crisis and enter a year when a general election might bring political change. It offers an insight into the vital work carried out by our 10 regional centres and local-level volunteer members working in diverse regions and contexts. We articulate some important steps that could be taken to progress this agenda and

bring opportunities to all. Drawing on a range of data, material and case studies, this report captures the lived experiences and voices of those who depend on and access the SVP's frontline services. This report calls for three key recommendations to ensure a policy aimed at tackling regional inequalities can succeed:

- Strengthen the social security system and help people meet their aspirations;
- Recognise the role charities play in delivering local services and review the current model of delivering services for the community;
- Devolve power and funding to local decision makers.

Because of our frontline and grassroots work carried out in, and with, communities across the country, the SVP possesses a unique and unparalleled insight into the challenges, difficulties and issues faced by vulnerable individuals and families. We believe it is possible to address regional inequalities, and look forward to working alongside local communities, government, other charities and the faith community to deliver on this.

49% increase

in the number of requests for help to our national office in 2023 from the previous year

Foreword

by Jeannette Morgan, St Vincent's Wirral Centre Manager

Over the last year we have seen a dramatic increase in demand for our services across the country as the cost of living crisis took hold. In our small Birkenhead centre, we have supported more than 11,000 people since April 2023. Likewise, the national picture is worrying as requests for help to our national office have increased by 49% compared with 2022.

Like our nine other Community Support Projects (CSPs) in England and Wales, our St Vincent's Wirral Centre is in an area of high deprivation and is representative of many of the areas our CSPs and volunteer members are based in. Our centre is a vibrant hub based at the heart of the community, supporting residents through a range of projects and activities. We tackle social, economic and health inequalities – crucial in tackling those regional inequalities the government has set out to address.

Last year, our centre was approached by Wirral Borough Council to deliver essential services for the community on their behalf – funded through the Department for Work and Pension's (DWP) Household Support Scheme.

This grant allowed us to provide financial support to people and families in need. This model has been successful in delivering wraparound and tailored support to people, rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach.

We cannot, however, do this alone. Rising demand for our help, increasing reliance on charities to deliver essential services without adequate government funding and a failure to provide a strong social security safety net means there are risks to the success of those policy interventions seeking to address regional inequalities.

We are best placed to meet the objectives set out to address regional inequalities because we are rooted in the community, and we have been for the past 180 years. We can 'level-up' and 'break down barriers to opportunities' because we are experts in, and of, our own communities, and we can respond quickly when others cannot.

With a general election on the horizon, we urge policymakers of all colours to make tackling regional inequalities a priority. This publication offers precious insight into what works, and what needs to be changed, if this mission is to be achieved. We hope that by listening and implementing our recommendations from the frontline, policymakers can succeed in their ambitions.

17,000
people and more
offered support at
our regional centres
in 2023 alone.

Reflecting on the levelling up agenda

Whilst regional inequalities remain extensive, the numerous policy responses aimed at eradicating them are certainly nothing new. The worsening regional economic inequalities witnessed in recent years – and documented in the 2022 Levelling Up White Paper – have shed light on the government's policies' strengths and limitations. A clear and effective policy on how to level up the UK has never been more critical, pressing and needed, yet growing inequalities are proving difficult to tackle and reverse.

The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) North argued that the "...white paper proposed a welcome path for further devolution", but that both the White Paper itself and the policy developments that followed "...fail to unlock the essential government resources required to level up" (Johns and Hutt, 2023). Similarly, the final report of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Left Behind Neighbourhoods maintained that "...given current trends, it is just as likely that without a change in policy, 'left behind' neighbourhoods will slide further back" (APPG for 'Left Behind' Neighbourhoods, 2023).

Overall, a range of both short- and long-term societal and structural factors have been identified as threatening to obstruct any real attempt to level up the country. These include the UK's highly-centralised system of government, public spending and funding; insufficient collaboration between the UK's central and subnational governments; a lack of strategic prioritisation and investment; the prevalence and severity of local-level inequalities across the UK; and the impact of austerity, high levels of inflation, the cost of living crisis and the Covid 19 pandemic (Atherton and Webb, 2022; APPG for 'Left Behind' Neighbourhoods, 2023; LGA, 2023; Johns and Hutt, 2023). Yet the levelling up agenda is arguably more important than ever, with the Resolution Foundation predicting that income inequality in the

UK could reach a record high in 2027–2028 (Brewer, Fry and Try, 2023).

One of the most significant arguments about levelling up is the importance of the local level. If levelling up is to be successful, it must adopt a long-term bottom-up, rather than a top-down, approach that is rooted in local communities' lived experiences and social and cultural contexts. Moreover, it is crucial that this approach be reflected in all aspects of the government's agenda for tackling regional inequalities, including: principles and processes; funding and investment models; the levels of communication and engagement with, and between, lower tiers of government and local partners and communities; and the focus on community agency, leadership, empowerment and ownership (Young, Farrow, et al. 2021; Giovannini and Griggs, 2022; Kaye and King, 2022; Hawksbee and Menon, 2023; APPG for 'Left Behind' Neighbourhoods 2023; LGA 2023).

Furthermore, we are reminded that charities and **faith-based groups and organisations are important local-level stakeholders in a position to help tackle regional inequalities**. They are rooted in communities across the country, and boosting equality, opportunities, wellbeing and a sense of community and belonging is what they do daily (Young, Farrow, et al. 2021; Faith Action, 2023).

The partially encouraging takeaway message is that such entrenched, severe and ever-increasing regional inequalities in the UK are avoidable and that, though difficult to overturn, some progress has been made – and yet more is possible. The worrying and cautionary finding, however, is that urgent action is needed if there is to be any chance of getting the levelling up agenda back on track (Johns and Hutt, 2023; Turner, Weinberg, et al. 2023; Hawksbee and Menon, 2023; APPG for 'Left Behind' Neighbourhoods 2023).

Raising the alarm – Skyrocketing demand for help

Our insight helps us to develop evidence-based policy recommendations that respond to individuals’ and families’ issues and needs in a more effective way.

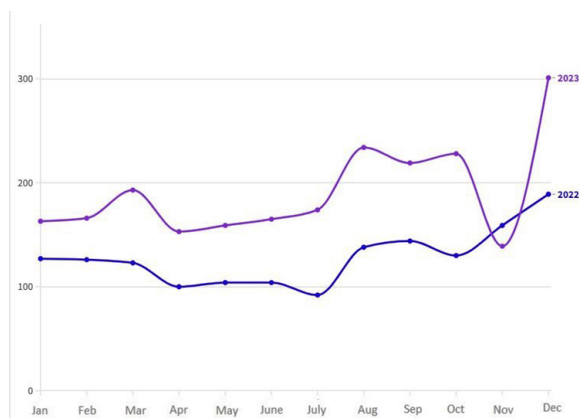
In recent months and years, levelling up seems to have slipped down the government’s priority list; meanwhile regional inequalities remain as stark as ever with many communities being left behind and people being held back from achieving their potential. In light of this it is perhaps unsurprising that the term levelling up has lost some of its shine, with policymakers now searching for different concepts to understand and address regional imbalances in living standards. At the time of writing, we have seen a staggering 49% increase in the number of requests for help to our national office. This signals a concerning rise in the number of people in crisis who are unable to meet their basic needs. This has been a trend over the past twenty years, but one which has rapidly increased post-Covid 19.

Our most recent targeted survey of volunteer members on the cost of living crisis received over 40 responses. We asked our members to tell us if the people

they supported had struggled to pay for essential items in the last 12 months. **90% of respondents said people they helped could not afford essential items, and 79% said the person or people they helped could not afford to buy food.**

While the discourse around levelling up has evolved since the publication of the original White Paper, it continues to lack focus and measurable objectives. At the October 2023 Conservative Party Conference, it became clear that levelling up meant a focus on improving the transport infrastructure, with less importance given to rebuilding intangible social infrastructure and more elusive issues like rebuilding the social fabric of those at the margins and ‘left behind’ areas. Likewise, at the 2023 Labour Party Conference, MPs and Shadow Ministers did not articulate clearly what ‘tackling regional inequalities’ would look like under a Labour government; although it was acknowledged that there is a need for this to happen.

Ahead of the next general election political parties have an opportunity to better articulate how they will tackle regional inequalities through targeted policy interventions.



Source: The total number of requests for help (to national office) Jan-Dec 2022 was 1536. In December 2023 this number was much higher and the total number of requests for help (to our national office) was 2294.



SVP requests for help to our national office have been growing steadily over the past twenty years

Key recommendations

This report sets out recommendations to address regional inequalities based on our frontline insight and evidence. By consulting with our frontline services and people with lived experience, we have identified several cross-cutting themes and ideas for a renewed and focused policy agenda to tackle regional inequalities. Speaking with people who are living the reality of unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities, and those who are there to support them every day, we are given a clear understanding of the scale of the problem. The picture that emerged through our interviews and analysis of data is one of rising demand and decreasing support by state services.

This research also gave us an insight into some of the solutions to these problems. These include the urgent need to improve the welfare system, as without a strong

safety net, again and again people find themselves unable to break down those barriers to thriving. We have also found that the key to successful interventions lies in a wraparound and person-centred approach that can be delivered by local experts. Policy interventions devised in Westminster often fail to reflect the needs on the ground. We are therefore calling for greater recognition of the role charities play in delivering local services and a review of the current model of delivering services for the community.

Through interviews with local experts, we have identified three key recommendations we urge policymakers to implement.

1. Strengthen the social security system and help people meet their aspirations

A strong and reliable social security safety net is essential to address regional inequalities and support people in 'left behind' neighbourhoods. Through our research, we found that raising the basic rate of Universal Credit is particularly important for those in areas of high deprivation. Anecdotal evidence from our latest survey of members showed that 58% of people and families supported by our members with essential goods were in receipt of Universal Credit. And out of these, 92% struggled to pay for food in the last year.

Measures to boost productivity, revitalise communities, and address inequalities between regions can only be achieved if people can rely on a strong welfare system. As in the case of some of the people we interviewed for this research, including many of the attendees of our food club in Chorley, Universal Credit often fails to help people meet their



essentials. Our case study on our food club provision in Chorley explores this more (see page 18).

One of our Yorkshire-based Conferences supporting more than 18 families and around 54 children says:

“*The amount [of Universal Credit] is not enough to live on for families, so we help with supermarket vouchers during school holidays and the occasional food donation, and we also help with the cost of electricity for the families who are on pre-payment meters. The benefits just about cover day-to-day living for most of the families but when a child needs new shoes, a winter coat or school uniform then this becomes a crisis. That’s when we step in.”*

We are calling for an increase in the basic rate of Universal Credit’s standard allowance, echoing calls by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust. Introducing an Essentials Guarantee would ensure that the basic rate of Universal Credit would at least cover life’s essentials, such as food and bills. In turn, this would help make sure the other policy interventions aimed at addressing regional inequalities can succeed in their ambitions.

2. Recognise the role charities play in delivering local services and review the current model of delivering services for the community

Charities are increasingly delivering services previously provided by state agencies, Local Authorities (LA) and the National Health Service (NHS). We are also seeing an increase in demand – over the past year, the SVP has seen a 49% increase in requests for help to our national office.

Our frontline services are increasingly being asked to deliver services which used to be in the hands of Local Authorities. For example, in Chorley, our volunteers are providing free school uniforms to children across 50 local schools. This is a project which used to be delivered by the LA, which has asked our centre to take it over.

In other cases included in this report we have witnessed our services stepping in where traditional services couldn’t offer a tailored approach. We have seen this for example in the case of our centre in Newcastle which supports people



referred by the Jobcentre Plus who have complex needs and require support to find employment. This type of support is in many cases provided by charities without additional funding. You can read more about this on page 20.

Local charities as frontline experts with an understanding of the local context are increasingly stepping in to plug a gap. Where state services cannot deliver for lack of funding, charities like the SVP are stepping in, able to respond quickly and offer wraparound support.

However, this is an unsustainable model. If regional inequalities are to be tackled, cuts to core services must be reversed, and the role charities play in tackling poverty must be clearly acknowledged. Measures should include more funding for Local Authorities and NHS provision. **The government must also rethink its model of delivering local services. This should start with a thorough evaluation of who is delivering local services and how they are being funded.** This will be the first step in strengthening the social contract between the State, the public and Civil Society. This will also help ensure the role of charities and the third sector is more clearly recognised.

3. Devolve power and funding to local decision makers

National policy initiatives as ambitious as tackling regional inequalities will only deliver change if local decision makers are given more freedom to tailor them to local needs. We believe that the key to the success of a long-term strategy to address regional inequalities is to help local stakeholders deliver what's needed by working closely with them – drawing on their knowledge and insight of local challenges and solutions.

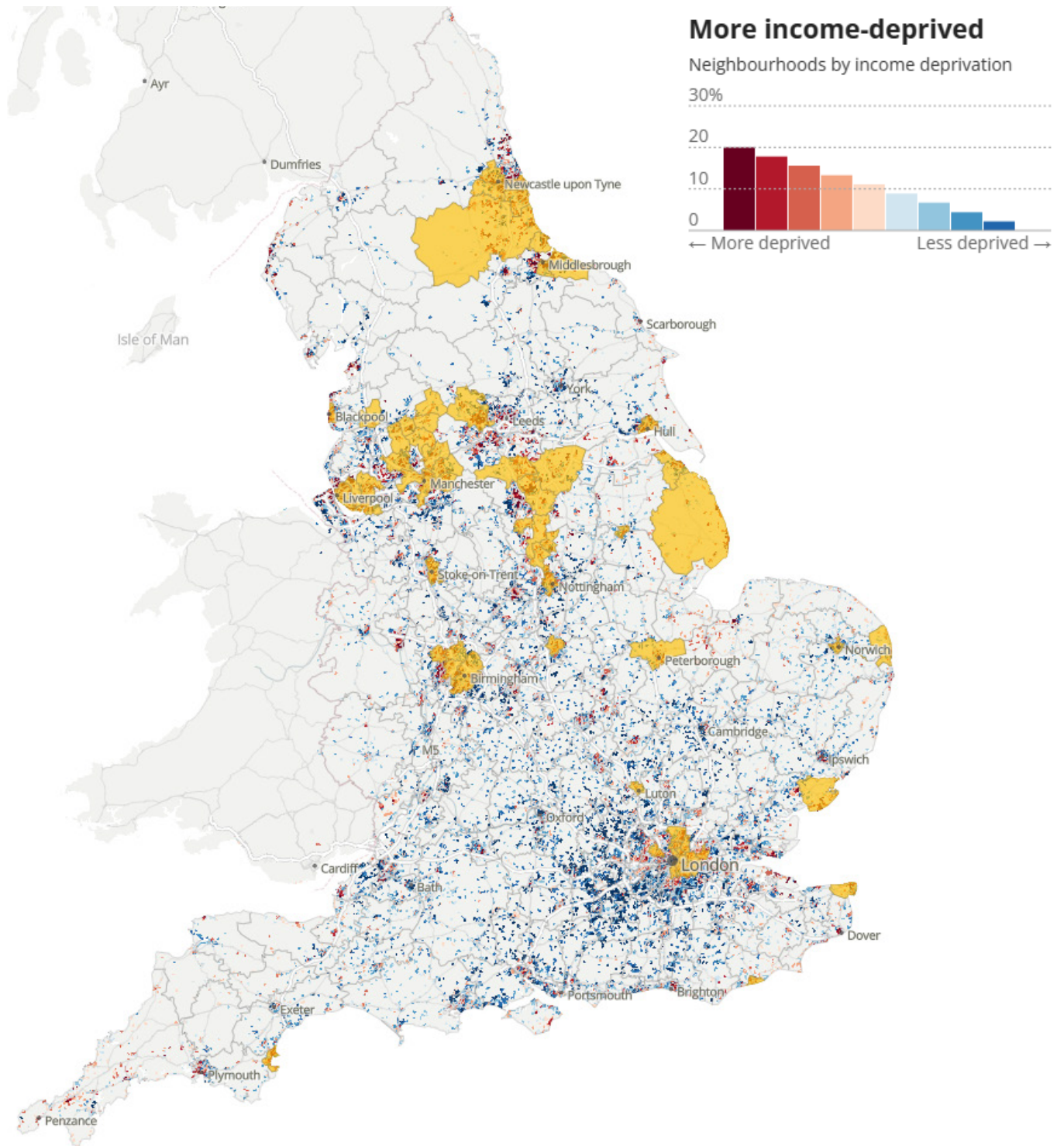
However, a barrier to this is the process for applying to levelling up funding, which is burdensome and challenging for local stakeholders. Future policy needs to go hand-in-hand with the devolution of funding decisions, which would enable local actors and devolved authorities to gain more control over funding decisions. The Institute for Government (IfG) has also recently advised for funding simplification, to help devolved governments to be more effective (McKee, Pope and Coggins, 2023).

As part of this, it is vital to involve people with lived experience in local decision making and service delivery. **As many of our projects show, involving and empowering people with lived experience to deliver projects increases their success.** As our Smart Recovery Programme in Southend and our partnership with the local Jobcentre Plus in Newcastle demonstrate, empowering local leaders can address inequalities at the local level and deliver on the promise to boost the economy and revitalise communities. You can read more about this on pages 14 and 20.

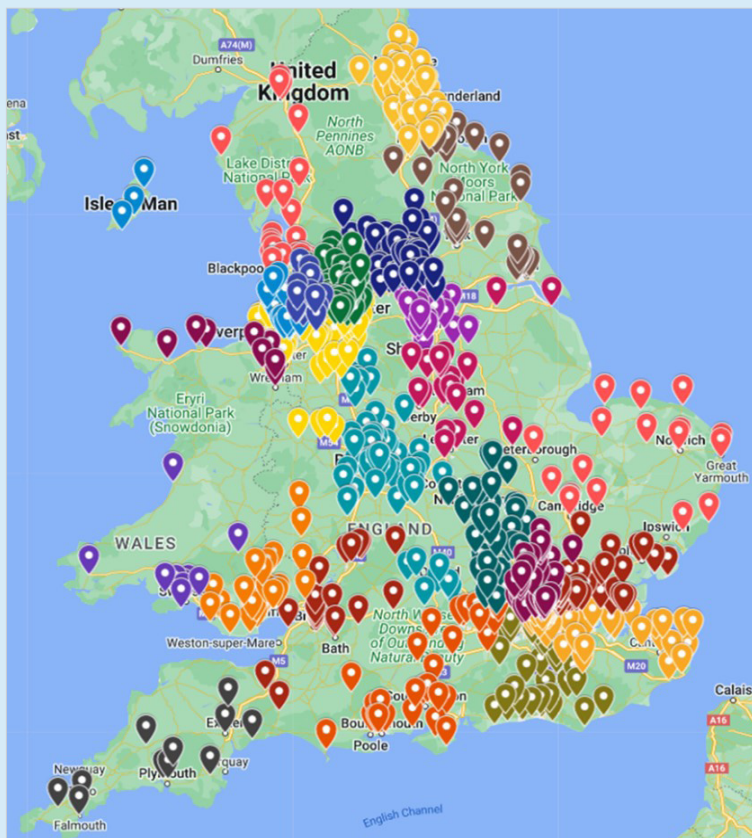
17/20 most deprived areas

The SVP has projects, volunteer members or centres in 17 of the 20 most deprived areas by income deprivation.

The maps below and on the next page show the overlap between the areas with the highest levels of deprivation and the areas in which the SVP is most active, both in terms of its centres and its Conferences.



Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2021.



The SVP's local-level reach and community-led services across England and Wales allow for a unique grassroots insight into what our diverse communities need. As a charity helping people in poverty for

180 years

the SVP has a long-standing history of working closely with many of the communities in those areas identified as a priority by government policy.



In 2022/23 we provided

80,000

meals in our St Vincent's centres and supported

19,000

people through our foodbanks, providing over 46,000 meals. The level of need is like nothing we have seen before.

From the frontline: The work of our centres and Conferences

The SVP's CSPs and Conferences help address regional inequalities in England and Wales in a wide range of ways. The CSPs act as important hubs that sit at the heart of local communities and are accessible to everyone, and their cafés, shops and gardens are safe and welcoming spaces that promote a local sense of community and belonging. Conferences' work is led by person-to-person contact and takes diverse forms. Both CSPs and Conferences build long-term relationships with their beneficiaries and help build an essential social infrastructure network.

From Leeds, Bradford, Newcastle and North London to Sheffield, Ely Bridge, Cardiff and Birkenhead in the Wirral, this is delivered through diverse initiatives. These include those that help people return to education and gain the necessary confidence and skills to find work; offer advice and support with regards to benefits, budgeting, debt, housing, immigration, employment, mental health, digital education and inclusion, and healthy food and cooking on a budget; and provide opportunities to participate in social activities like arts and crafts, boxing, drama, gardening, music and yoga.

Our case studies in the section below show how our projects and services align with and address many of the government's White Paper's and subsequent legislation's key missions. Regardless of the terminology used, these missions which include addressing living standards, health, wellbeing, education, skills, the digital connectivity gap, local leadership, and promoting a sense of community and pride in place, remain a crucial challenge for the current and next government.

Whilst not specifically mentioned in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act, the regional inequalities policy mission has been broadly built around four key themes:

- Boosting productivity, jobs, pay and living standards
- Spreading opportunities and improving public services
- Restoring a sense of community, local pride and belonging
- Empowering local leaders and communities

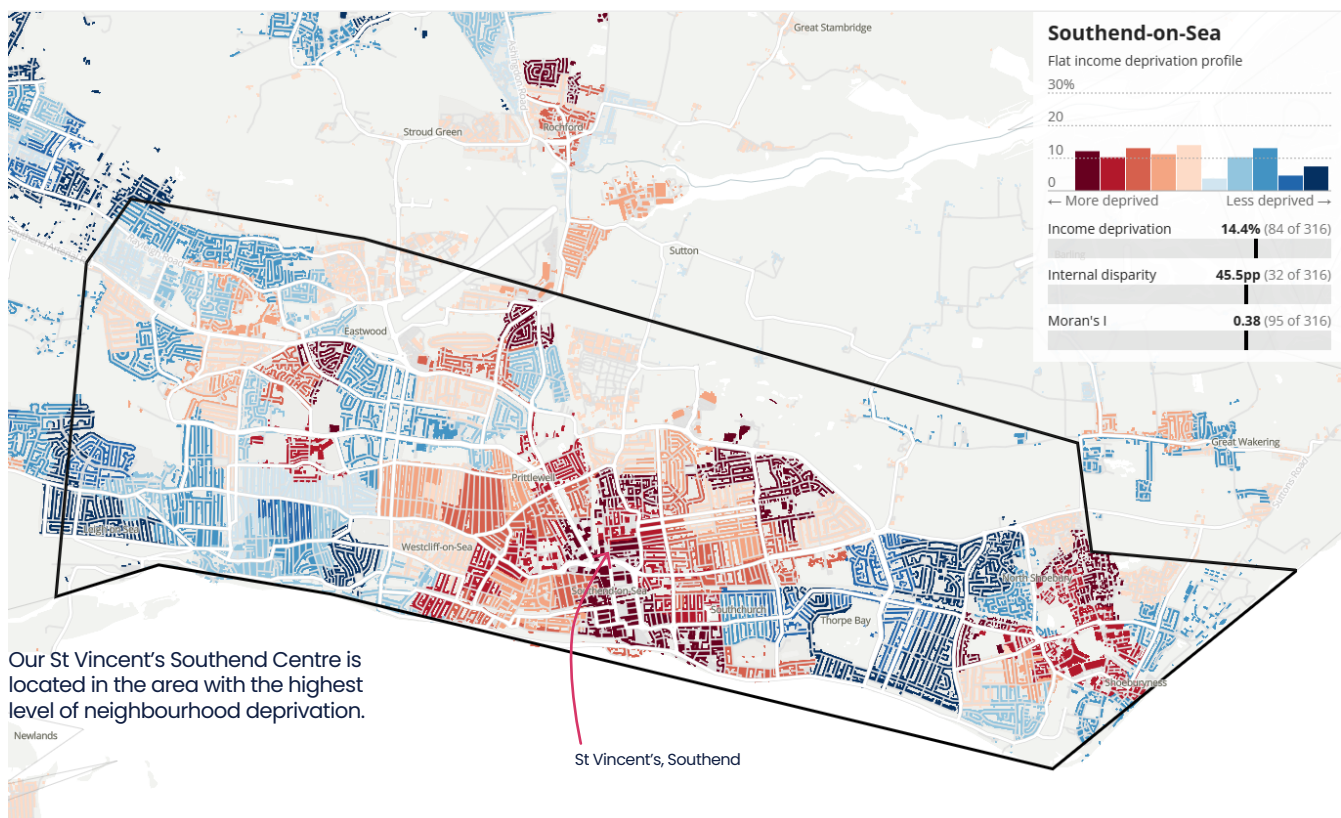
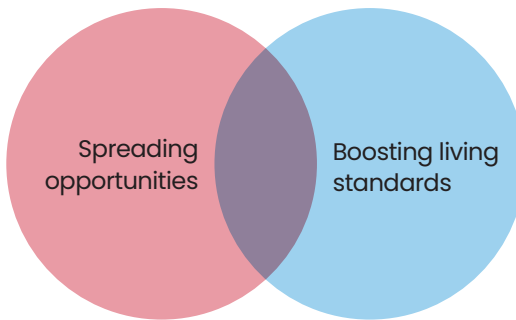


The SVP's projects showcased in this report exemplify how the SVP has been delivering on these objectives for many years. As the stories in this report show, centres and Conferences continue to address these themes in a holistic manner.

Case studies

Revitalising communities: 'Smart Recovery' in Southend

In Southend-on-Sea, 14.4% of the population was income-deprived in 2019. Of the 316 local authorities in England (excluding the Isles of Scilly), Southend-on-Sea is ranked 84th most income-deprived.




The St Vincent's Centre in Southend runs a Smart Recovery Programme as a direct response to substance abuse and addiction in the city that is run by two of the centre's beneficiaries who are now in recovery. It is a 12-week programme that is open to anyone struggling with addiction, including individuals for whom other programmes and paths to recovery have not worked. Its spiritual dimension is optional, and it can be tailored to the

needs of the individual participants or cohort at any given time. It adopts a holistic and natural approach to recovery, and it helps people identify their triggers and develop the tools to manage them. The programme supports people's decisions to change, and it focuses on self-reflection, empowerment, the sharing of real-life experiences, and allowing people to become who they aspire to be when they are ready.

However, the St Vincent's Centre's efforts to help people overcome substance abuse and addiction extend beyond the delivery of the Smart Recovery Programme, and it is its holistic approach to recovery that sets its offer apart from what is available elsewhere. Its vibrant and varied programme of activities and wraparound support service encourage beneficiaries to get involved in other activities, engage with all aspects of the centre, and become part of the local community. Crucially, this provides them with a sense of purpose and allows them to stay busy throughout the week, which in turn helps them manage addiction relapse triggers.

One of the centre's beneficiaries, Matt, has a history of using and selling drugs. He has spent time in prison, has experienced homelessness, and suffers from a number of health problems. He was introduced to the SVP after relocating back to Southend in 2022, and he began visiting and interacting with the centre, and eventually became a volunteer. He explains how he had found somewhere people are "...willing to learn and listen and actually care" and work with him to find a solution, and how the centre has been key to his recovery. He says:

 *They've basically helped me so much in my recovery. If it wasn't for them I couldn't say I'd be 18 months clean sitting here now...Without that support, I wouldn't have made it at all, I don't think. Or I would have found it very, very hard.'*

Having completed the Smart Recovery Programme elsewhere, he has participated in, and offered support to, the delivery of the programme at the centre and is undergoing training to become a facilitator. He appreciates that the programme focuses on the individual, and on learning tools that are useful for both recovery and decision

making in life more broadly. He can use his lived experience, unique perspective and knowledge of the programme to support others in recovery, which has in turn helped him with his confidence and mental health.

Matt's engagement with St Vincent's Southend has been about much more than just the Smart Recovery Programme. The centre offers him a community space he can visit and a range of activities he can take part in as and when he wants, and as often as on a daily basis. He has been involved in a personal development group and the allotment, and he has been central to the centre's Hungry Cupboard project, which collects food in schools for local people in need. He has also undertaken various types of training, including in mental health first aid and suicide awareness.

Being able to choose his own activities and stay occupied in this way has given him agency and independence and helped him in his recovery, and he has gradually been able to shape his own role and position at the centre.

Furthermore, the centre always has more to offer him, and it supports his development and progression in a way that revolves and works around him and what he needs and wants. In his words, it has given him "...the time and space to grow within my own story...".

Matt feels listened to, consulted, included, and part of a community. When talking about the centre, he says that "...there's nothing else like it really", and that it has given him a future that he is "...quite enthusiastic and positive about". He is writing his life story, and he has ambitions to help people with substance abuse problems, work with prisons, teach young people about the dangers of drugs, and pursue a counselling diploma. Overall, Matt's relationship and experience at St Vincent's Southend has allowed him to

develop skills and knowledge, provided him with a sense of direction and purpose, and helped with his health and wellbeing. **The approach to recovery that is pursued at the St Vincent's centre in Southend promotes a local culture of empowerment and resilience.**

Those with lived experience who run the Smart Recovery Programme increase their resilience by having a purpose, building positive and meaningful social connections, acquiring skills and knowledge, and using their pasts to help and support others. Those

participating in the programme are given the opportunity to interact with individuals who have recovered from an addiction, which empowers them to want to take control of their lives and do the same. Overall, the centre's holistic approach to recovery, and the way it provides a space for authentic social interactions and community building, enables beneficiaries to become actively involved in local community activities, whilst maintaining independence and agency. **It is an example of how social infrastructure can add real value to a local area marked by high levels of deprivation.**

Community cohesion and reducing reoffending in Ely, Wales




The St Vincent's Centre in Ely Bridge in Cardiff works on the Grand Avenues project with His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) in Wales and various other partners. The project is run in the Ely and Caerau areas of the city, two wards with high levels of reoffending. It constitutes a new way of decreasing reoffending amongst men on probation by promoting a sense of understanding and acceptance, focusing on their rehabilitation, and recognising the pivotal role that local communities have to play in this process. As such, the

project is delivered in community spaces like the SVP centre where these men work with probation officers. Its peer mentor system helps probationers access the help and support they need, thus allowing them to focus on their strengths and become integrated and active in the local community. Some of the project's peer mentors have lived experiences of their own in that they have been through the criminal justice system and have been beneficiaries of the project themselves.

As well as reducing levels of reoffending, the project provides probationers and their families with a range of support and opportunities that promote personal development and success. Raihan, for example, became increasingly involved with the St Vincent's Ely Bridge centre in late 2022, having first been introduced to the centre by his probation officer upon being released from prison. The centre has provided him with confidence, and a unique community that he is proud

to belong to in which he has been able to grow and find new opportunities. Furthermore, the support he has received has made him realise that he has something to offer, and his goal is to help others in the community, and he has become an SVP Community Peer Worker on the project. As he explains:

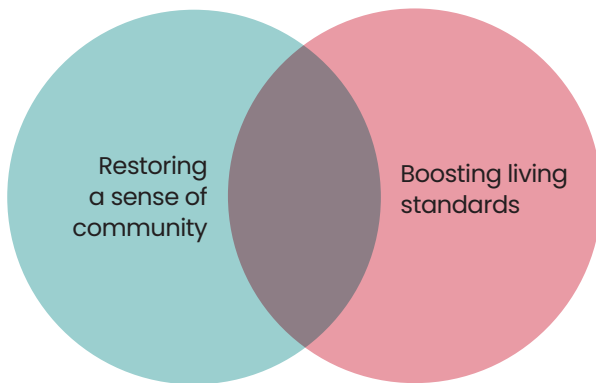
 *I realised that people actually cared, they genuinely wanted to help and wanted what was best for me. In November, I started to get more involved with everything and to engage a lot more – the next thing I knew, I was offered a job... It changed everything: within six months, I went from being in jail to being a peer mentor, offering support to the community I grew up in. It baffles me but I'm so grateful for it.'*

The project gives members of the local community like Raihan the opportunity to work at the centre, thereby enabling them to gain professional experience, develop skills, and acquire a new sense of identity and purpose. As well as helping men going through the criminal justice system, Raihan has also become involved in other activities and initiatives at the centre, and he has worked on a podcast on the topic of mental health, for example. The probationers benefit from the guidance and mentorship of people from the local community with lived

experiences who they feel comfortable engaging with. They also receive help and support across a range of areas, including benefits, housing, wellbeing and upskilling, as well as opportunities with regards to employment, volunteering, developing positive social interactions and friendships, participating in centre activities, and being an active part of a local community, identity and infrastructure.

The outcomes and impact of St Vincent's Ely Bridge's work on the Grand Avenues Project in Cardiff extend far beyond reducing reoffending amongst probationers. The centre helps restore a local sense of community pride and belonging, and it creates and empowers local leaders by providing a space in which individuals can reinvent themselves and have a positive influence on others. In doing so, **it demonstrates the extent to which local communities, partnership working, lived experiences, a holistic support system and a person-centred approach are crucial to promoting community cohesion and spreading opportunities.** It is such factors that build trust and strong relationships between individuals, communities and stakeholders, and go some way towards tackling economic and social inequalities in urban areas experiencing significant levels of recidivism and deprivation.

Food security – No levelling up with food poverty



In Chorley, 10.2% of the population was income-deprived in 2019. Of the 316 local authorities in England (excluding the Isles of Scilly), Chorley is ranked 177th most income-deprived.

In Chorley, Lancashire, Chorley Buddies is an SVP community group run by SVP staff, members and local volunteers. It provides a food poverty support service by running five weekly Good Food Clubs in different areas of the town. The clubs sell food that would have otherwise gone to landfill and help people during the cost of living crisis. The clubs' members pay £10 to join and £5 every time they visit one of the clubs. Members choose their preferred goods from a wide range of products that include fruit and vegetables, frozen and tinned food, rice and pasta, bread, cereals, personal hygiene products, and clothing and household items.

The food clubs help around 1,100 people each week. The beneficiaries include pensioners, and people who live alone or with family members. Some experience financial hardship for various reasons, such as cost of living, low incomes and

unemployment, and others are attracted to the idea of being able to help save food from landfill.

Not only does the service help people experiencing food poverty and insecurity in a time of crisis, but it also tackles inequalities and creates opportunities in various ways. It promotes financial independence, self-reliance and stability in that beneficiaries learn how to plan, purchase and manage food on a tight budget without having to depend on food parcels as often. In doing so, the service builds individuals' and communities' resilience and confidence, thereby making the need to rely on statutory services less likely. Furthermore, several organisations run pop-up clinics at the food clubs to provide people with advice, support and information on various topics, including debt, budgeting, employment, housing, home energy and social activity sessions.

Clare¹ has been participating in one of the food clubs for over a year. She initially went along to find out more about the service because she thought it might be a useful resource for those she supports through her own volunteering work. However, Clare has benefited from it herself, has used it to help support her daughter and to network, and she has told others in the town about the service. Furthermore, she points out that some people pick up items at the clubs to pass on to family members who are perhaps unable to attend themselves. This implies that the food clubs could have an even greater impact in Chorley than is often realised.

¹ Not her real name

Clare believes that the food clubs provide various benefits. Not only do they offer great value for money and therefore help people financially, but they also stop food from going to landfill, and promote healthy eating and wellbeing. Her participation has also made her more aware of the extent of the cost of living crisis and more mindful about the food items that she needs and buys.

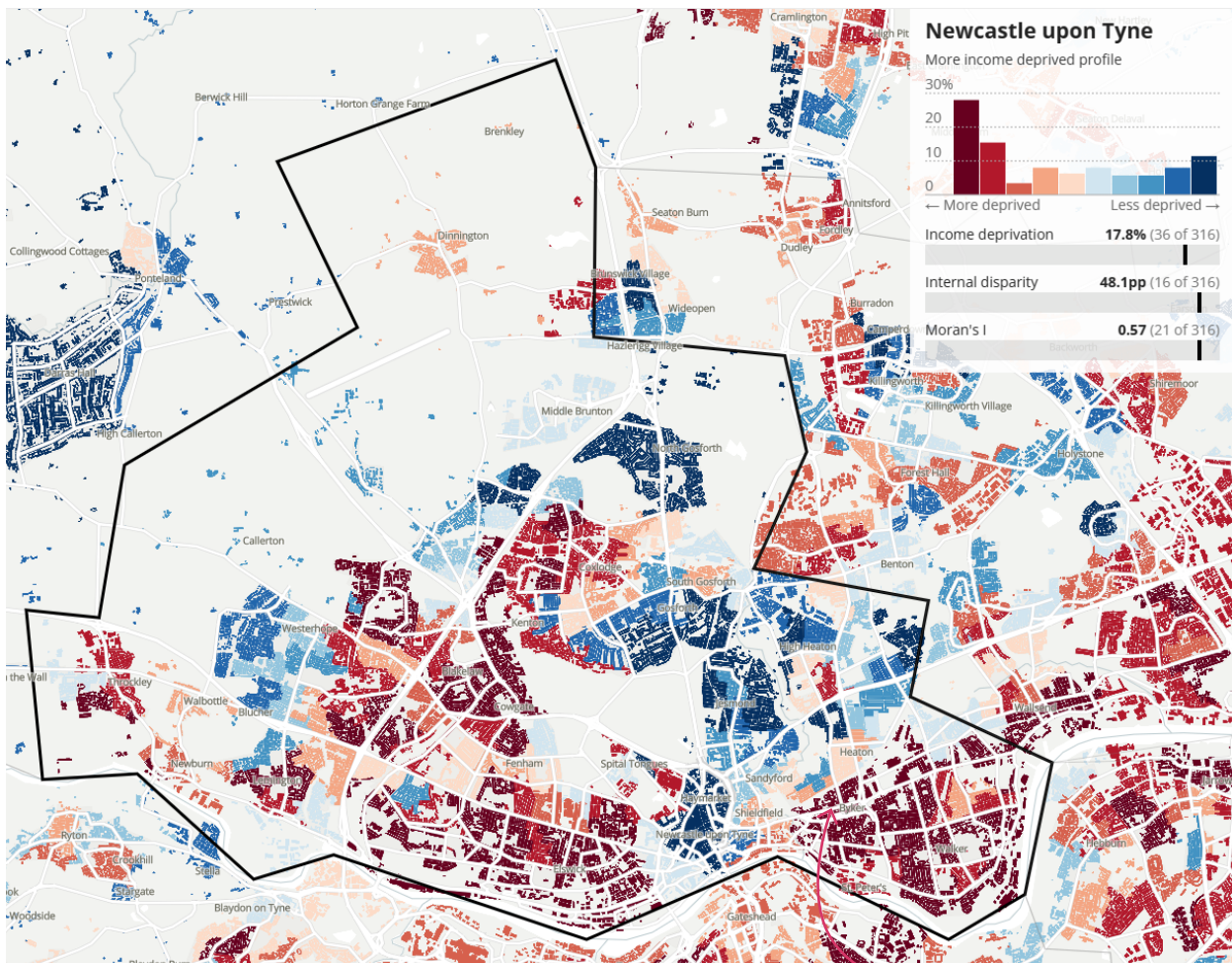
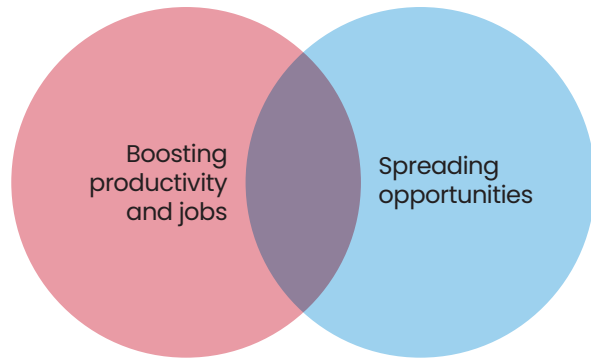
Clare believes that the food clubs stand out from other services and are plugging a gap in Chorley for various reasons. **She stresses the importance of people not being referred to the clubs to participate. This means that anyone can benefit from the service, including people who may work, yet who might be struggling financially.** People can join without having to disclose too many details about their personal circumstances, meaning they can receive support whilst maintaining their dignity. Some members are attracted to the clubs by the idea of being able to

help reduce food waste. People are also able to choose their preferred goods which, alongside attending the clubs, she believes "...might give them a bit of self-worth". Finally, she also commends the service for providing a space in which members can get advice and support on topics such as debt and mental health.

The Good Food Clubs in Chorley represent much more than a food poverty support service. They provide a space in which people can come together on a weekly basis and are provided with a sense of dignity and independence. Located in areas of the town with different levels of deprivation, the clubs serve diverse purposes for their varied members and spread both economic and social opportunities. They promote financial stability and resilience, enable social interaction, and help improve mental health and wellbeing, which in turn fosters a local sense of community and belonging and boosts living standards.

Removing barriers to employment in the North East

In Newcastle upon Tyne, 17.8% of the population was income-deprived in 2019. Of the 316 local authorities in England (excluding the Isles of Scilly), Newcastle upon Tyne is ranked 36th most income-deprived.



St Vincent's, Newcastle

St Vincent's Newcastle helps people gain the confidence and workplace skills needed for paid employment. It does this by hosting clients referred to them by DWP Jobcentre Plus work coaches on job placements of between 18 and 30 hours per week across an eight-week period. The placements are shaped around individuals' respective strengths, interests and development. The centre tries to give clients the opportunity to work in different areas in order to assess where they are best suited. If someone is interested in working in catering, for example, an effort is made to allow them to gain experience in the kitchen where they prepare and serve food. If someone is not yet ready to work, a placement and role at the centre that revolves around tasks that enable self-development and confidence-building is created for them. It is this wraparound and person-centred support offered at St Vincent's Newcastle that allows it to play an important role in helping people return to work.

John, a former supermarket cleaner who was made redundant, is one client who completed a placement at the centre. His placement focused on retail, and it allowed him to gain confidence and a set of new skills. He worked in the sorting room, and he gained experience, knowledge and skills with regards to tagging, hanging, labelling and sorting stock, interacting and engaging with a variety of people and the wider public, and health and safety risks, awareness and practices.

John was able to choose the focus of his own placement, and he emphasises how what he learnt during the eight weeks means that he would "...know what to do straight away" were he to work in retail. He refers to the St Vincent's centre as having been "...like one big family", and he stresses that his time there has given him "...a lot of confidence" and that he feels ready for job interviews.

The fact that the DWP Jobcentre Plus refers clients to St Vincent's Newcastle suggests that it recognises the part the centre has to play in helping people develop the confidence, experience and skills needed to re-enter the workforce. Through the job placements and its person-centred approach, it invests in people and supports them as they improve their skill sets and knowledge, and ultimately enhance their job prospects and their chances of progressing into new types of employment.

In doing so, St Vincent's Newcastle contributes to local efforts to both boost productivity and jobs and spread opportunities in an area experiencing significant levels of income deprivation. This reflects both the benefits of working collaboratively and the importance of drawing on community-rooted organisations' local presence, knowledge and expertise in efforts to remove employment barriers and ultimately tackle regional inequalities.

Manors project – Building resilient communities and a sense of belonging in Newcastle



The SVP's adoption of Manors train station in Newcastle in August 2022 as part of Northern's Station Adoption scheme is an initiative that empowers communities, boosts wellbeing and living standards, and restores a local sense of belonging and pride. The project was co-produced with external partners and, working across St Vincent's Newcastle and the SVP Deaf Centre, its volunteers play an important part in regenerating what has become a fairly minor, aging and small train station on the East Coast Main Line. They include students, migrants, the deaf and former homeless people, and they have worked alongside wider community groups and partners, and used their diverse artistic skills, from knitting and woodwork to ceramics and textiles, to create a community-led urban exhibition.

The exhibition was officially opened in September 2023 and, although work on it is continuing, it has already gone some

way towards both improving the station's environment and fostering a local sense of collaboration and community. It reflects what has been a relatively unique opportunity for diverse individuals to work together and use their varied artistic and creative skills to help revive an inner-city station in an area that has experienced significant levels of deprivation and poverty, but also redevelopment and transformation.

Jane² came to the UK as an asylum seeker and she first engaged with the SVP in Newcastle by using the foodbank. She learned about the other activities and opportunities available, and she began to participate in the Manors project. The SVP helped her by funding her transport, without which she would not have been able to take part. She contributed to the project by knitting, which allowed her to both draw on pre-existing skills and develop new ones, whilst other participants contributed in different ways.

Jane feels that the project was inclusive, and that it brought different people together and had a wide range of benefits. It helped her cope with her mental health condition while she waited to access the treatment she needed by allowing her to take the first step towards taking part in an activity outside of the house. She found knitting to be a relaxing activity that kept her mind busy, acted as a good distraction and helped her destress. Her participation in the project also helped her meet people, make friends and socialise, gain new creative

² Not her real name

skills and interests, and improve her English-language skills.

Jane also feels that the project has made her feel part of the local community and has given her "...a small sense of belonging in the city". Seeing Manors station makes her feel happy because, as she explains:

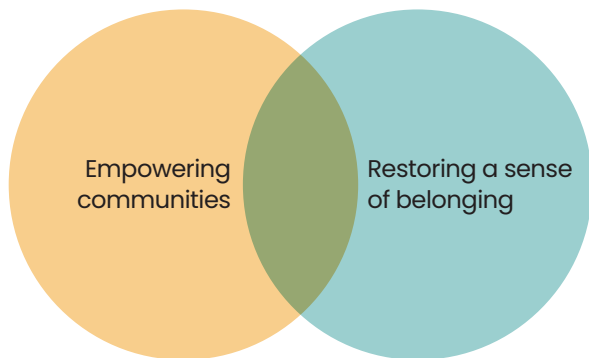
 *...it's part of me, my pathway is there'*

The project is also important to her because it was the first one that she took part in at SVP Newcastle, and it opened the door to a range of other opportunities, including seeking mental health support, participating in other SVP groups and activities, and volunteering at the Deaf Centre. Furthermore, she appreciates that she had the chance to partake in such a project and engage with SVP Newcastle more broadly, and points out that there is often an absence of activities for adults, with many aimed at families with children.

As such, she believes that what the SVP offers is unique and important because adults also need support, not least with mental health.

The Manors project is an example of how diverse community groups and stakeholders can join forces to engage with, revive and shape an urban space that has experienced significant decay and decline. It promotes local community agency and empowerment, and boosts wellbeing and a sense of belonging and pride in place. Furthermore, improving Manors station's environment is especially timely considering plans to re-open the Northumberland Line in 2024, which is expected to improve infrastructure and generate economic growth, investment and opportunities across the region, and result in more trains stopping at the station. Overall, the project shows both how community members can help shape their local surroundings and how they can benefit from doing so.

Digital inclusion – Improving accessibility in North London



In Islington, 17.9% of the population was income-deprived in 2019. Of the 316 local authorities in England (excluding the Isles of Scilly), Islington is ranked 35th most income-deprived.

During the Covid 19 pandemic, the St Joan of Arc Conference in Highbury in the North London borough of Islington began to address digital poverty by improving people's digital accessibility.


In an area marked by deep levels of inequality, Conference members responded directly to local community needs, and their initiatives helped tackle digital exclusion and social isolation. In doing so, they went some way towards both empowering communities and promoting a sense of inclusion and belonging. This work was initially made possible by way of donations through which the Conference distributed reconditioned laptops to families with children and tablets and digital radios to older people who were struggling to complete their schoolwork and finding it difficult to maintain social connectivity respectively.

Subsequently, prompted by an individual request for support from someone who was struggling to consult information online, and recognising the wider importance of digital access, members learned about the Good Things Foundation, a charity that works to tackle the digital divide in the UK. They joined the foundation's National Digital Inclusion Network, and they were successful in applying for SIM cards with six months of data for twenty people, after which time they were able to allocate additional data. This initiative benefited diverse individuals, including former care leavers, families and refugees. The Conference also successfully applied for eight tablets with data, which helped those who had been using mobile phones and limited amounts of data to look for work, access the benefit systems and find ways to rediscover their passions.

Glenn, who is now retired, has been supported by the Conference for the past six years, and received a tablet six months ago. Initially introduced to the Conference by his doctor, he was given a tablet and a SIM card with data. The tablet's size is particularly important to him as he enjoys recording and editing his own music through an app. As he explains:

...the size element is very important, especially for older people, as my eyesight is going. To have that size [tablet] makes all the difference'

Having access to the tablet has allowed Glenn to rediscover and explore his lifelong passion for music, showcase his passion and talent, and create soundscapes and music for films. Glenn says,

 *...you can get apps which are like music studios. And on the tablet, it's brilliant.'*

Glenn's experience illustrates that digital connectivity and inclusion can take a diverse range of forms, which policymakers may not always fully consider and address. Jo, one of the Conference members, also reflects on the assumption many people might have about those who are older and over seventy, and that we might sometimes forget they still have their own passions and interests. Furthermore, Glenn's case shows that there is a need for a more integrated approach with grassroots and

frontline groups like the SVP. Such groups can move quickly and respond to local individuals, communities and contexts, and they are able to adapt a service to people's particular and specific needs.

By taking a bottom-up approach, the Highbury SVP Conference successfully helps empower communities and restore a sense of belonging in the area. In doing so, it recognises the importance and the wide-ranging societal benefits of digital connectivity, including in relation to education, social inclusion, looking for work, and granting people the opportunity to pursue their passions and interests.

Furthermore, the Conference's work in this area is ongoing, and it intends to look at the possibility of providing digital training opportunities for some of its beneficiaries. In doing so, it will continue to play a part in improving people's digital accessibility and spreading opportunities in North London.

Conclusion

In many ways, levelling up has become a political soundbite that encompasses everything and nothing, and can be difficult to grasp, unpack and define. Yet the deep-rooted inequalities both between and within cities and regions that sit at the heart of this policy are daily realities for many of the country's poorest and most disadvantaged people, families and communities.

All politics are local – and hyperlocal. Therefore, as is reflected in our policy recommendations, it is with the local level in mind that measures to address the UK's inequalities and promote much needed change should be rolled out. They capture the importance of understanding diverse local contexts and the issues and challenges faced by those living in 'left behind' neighbourhoods; the consequences of cuts to local core services; how charities are doing more than ever before to deliver local services on the frontline; and the important role local decision makers and leaders can play in tackling inequalities if given the tools to do so.

The work carried out by our centres and Conferences provides us with a unique insight into the complexities of local-level socio-economic deprivation and need. We know that a real tangible and workable approach to tackling regional economic and social inequalities in the UK is needed, welcome and, arguably, overdue.

Furthermore, we recognise that lifting people out of poverty and helping them meet their aspirations, regardless of which part of the country they are in, is about much more than building physical infrastructure. Indeed, it is about rebuilding the stripped-down social fabric that is essential to diverse communities' wellbeing. Providing this infrastructure is what the SVP has been doing for almost 200 years.

We hope that our insights drive policymakers to take the urgent action that is needed to tackle regional inequalities and prevent even more people from falling into poverty.



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SVP England and Wales
national office, Romero House
55 Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7JB
www.svp.org.uk