

Social and community infrastructure: Lessons from Co Durham

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The example of Sacriston, a former mining village, shows the power of community organisation, but also its limits. Some problems can only be solved by political interventions, but these must work in collaboration with the community, and in harmony with the social infrastructure people have built for themselves.

The Labour Party emerged from a labour movement that was active on many fronts: fighting for workers' rights and decent pay, but also providing support for the elderly, housing, cooperative food shops, and many other social and community benefits. As John Tomaney notes elsewhere in this issue, it was well over 100 years ago that the Durham Miners' Association established the Durham Aged Mineworkers' Homes Association, for miners and their families who had to leave their colliery houses when their employment in the pits ended. By the mid-twentieth century, 29 per cent of the total population of the Northern Counties was in a cooperative society. Despite the swing to Morrisonian centralisation in the post-war period, a rich array of community organisations and community infrastructure still exists across Britain. Central and local government should work in collaboration with these organisations, initiatives and communities, drawing on their situated knowledge.

In this article we report on a pilot research project undertaken by researchers at UCL in conjunction with the Durham Miners' Association, exploring social infrastructure in the former mining village of Sacriston, four miles north west of Durham City, with a population of c. 6,000.¹ It shows that despite rapid social and economic changes following colliery closure – changes experienced as decline and loss by many in the village – the community has displayed resilience and, despite lasting austerity and many obstacles, made impressive efforts to maintain and build social infrastructure.

In recent years there has been growing academic interest in long-standing and profound place-based inequalities between and within regions. These inequalities are the product of several decades of deindustrialisation and have left some places with multiple forms of social and economic deprivation. Academic studies have identified a range of social, economic and political conditions associated with these processes, including poor health outcomes (including a prevalence of 'diseases of despair'), poor educational outcomes, low levels of skills and business formation and growth, and distinctive political attitudes, most notably reflected in many places in support for Brexit. In public debate these places are often called 'left behind'; this term has become a loose, catch-all signifier grouping together different kinds of peripheral places, and potentially stigmatising their residents as passive, immobile and impoverished. Such places have been subject to a range of policy measures over many years, which have had little impact on underlying social inequalities. The current Conservative response is to talk about 'levelling up', but this agenda amounts mainly to under-powered pork-barrel politics.

One facet of our research points to the need for macro and micro political interventions to deliver the sort of strong, rooted, foundational economies that places like Sacriston had in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s when their staple industry – coal –

powered the nation.ⁱⁱ The research also points to the profoundly interwoven nature of local economies and local communities. Working with existing community organisations, and building up social infrastructure, is vital to making better places. This should not be a top-down policy-making process, but one that is carried out in collaboration with people already working in a particular area.

In order to explore social infrastructure past, present and future, we organised two focus groups; the first had eight participants working in a formal capacity across diverse sectors, including education, housing, crisis services, policing and local government; the second involved six people who were supporting local business development, youth groups, churches and sports associations, many of whom were first responders during the Covid-19 lockdown. The response to the pandemic from within the community demonstrates how powerful place-based community action can be; as one participant reported:

we did a huge Covid response in our village, we were outstanding as to how we approached what we did, setting up food banks, setting up prescription services, setting up hot food deliveries to people, and lots of the people who we supported were already on more than one of our radars with regards to their additional needs or support that they needed.

Changes and challenges

Pit closures in Co Durham, which accelerated from 1985, and the loss of other industries like steel, created a series of interlocking challenges. Sacriston pit closed in 1985, and over the next eight years almost all the remaining pits in the county also shut. This hollowed out the economic core of the area: as one participant put it, ‘there is not much within the centres, it seems to be on the peripheries of them’. This was tied to a decline in local social capital – ‘a shift away from what you call a traditional community’ – with its local systems of mutual support. It was also intrinsically linked to a growing disparity of incomes and wealth: ‘you’ve got people who are using food banks, then you’ve also got people driving round in brand new cars, who live in the same street’. Growing disparities in income and the dominance of the car mean that Sacriston has lost many amenities, including a bank, pubs, and independent greengrocers, as well as the local secondary school: participants noted that the place risked ‘going dormant’.

The housing market was described as extremely problematic, transformed by the rise of absentee private landlords, and not in step with demographic change. The growing numbers of elderly people needed homes suited to their needs. Families on low incomes, meanwhile, often struggled to access affordable, decent quality housing. There has been a lot of building on the periphery of Sacriston; indeed, one participant commented that ‘every little plot of land in the village has been taken up and been developed and they’ve put houses on ... it just feels like housing, housing, housing’. For those on middle incomes, able to purchase one of these new houses, life was often comfortable, but these families often spent little time or money in the village:

those groups of people are called ‘the milk people’. So what they do is buy a house in Sacriston for reasonably cheap, they generally have got a decent amount of disposable income, but the only thing they interact with in the village is, on the way home from work, they go to Tesco and buy a pint of

milk, that's their only interaction with the village, so they're not supporting the economy, they're not shopping at our independent retailers like the butchers or anything like that, they're not going to community groups or to sporting activities, etc, so the only rationale behind them buying their house in Sacriston was a price point.

Despite these challenges, however, there is much pride in Sacriston. Local connections are important as an element of participants' individual identities, and as part of the underpinning logic for both formal interventions and self-organised local action to support the community.

Interventions

Three things emerge clearly from the research:

1. the power of place
2. the importance of social infrastructure with deep roots in the area
3. the need for interventions tailored to the needs of the village.

Funding cuts handed down by central government to local authorities have had a devastating effect. One participant noted that the 'county council cut 90 per cent of youth provision around the county, it was just cutting their nose off to spite their face'. But funding levels are not everything: how money is spent is also vitally important. Community organisations have carried on their work in the face of funding cuts, and it is essential for local government and other institutions like housing associations to 'plug into' local communities and associations. This helps keep people on board, provides conspicuous care, and reaches further into the community. Local associations are the backbone of community connections, offering the strong, trusting relations that are critical to the success of many initiatives. One participant recalled:

some of the institutions have been pretty much long lasting, the Working Men's Club, the Cricket Club ... the Ladies Club ... it is sort of family, it sounds daft, but my great uncle bought me club cards and ... one of the things he was delighted with was that he was the person that was able to buy me club cards for the first time because my granddad passed away a year before, so it's that sort of introduction ... like I was saying earlier, that introduction of people into things, if you bring them in ... they do have that ownership.

Changes to the housing market in Sacriston are also needed, as housing is a vital foundation for building and maintaining strong communities. Tailored interventions suited to the needs of the community are vital: Sacriston needs more affordable and social housing, and more housing suitable for elderly people, if community links and social networks are to be maintained.

Two key amenities in Sacriston were discussed. The first is the local community centre, which is having a 'good impact' on the village, not only because of offering services like a local café but as a vehicle to expand local amenities. The centre was built out of existing and historical infrastructure, and is being extended, through a series of initiatives, via the high street and outwards, towards other resources. One participant explained that:

It was our village square in 2008/2009 and that then led onto a play area and it led onto a community garden which, effectively, created a corridor from the commercial Front Street to the woodland at the back and the idea was, the next phase of that would be what we call The Welfare, which is an old colliery ... effectively a football pitch, and that was going to be the next stage of developments, to finish that corridor. That backs on to the cricket club as well, so it would create a really good, recreational civic hub.

The second amenity is the local co-operative, which again builds on historical infrastructure to strategically develop the local social offer. One participant described:

one of the projects I'm involved with is at the old Co-operative building which is obviously an entrenched part of our heritage ... we took up lease of those buildings which have been stood redundant for many years now ... the next phase of works by us, as a social enterprise, will then be to look at empty buildings on Front Street, which is the complementary commercial area, we will then buy buildings, we will then rent them out to tenants.

This mission of the co-operative model is to boost the types of economic activities that would create enduring value for the village and promote pro-social practices for the future:

the way that the sub leases will run is that anyone who comes into those buildings, either as a retailer or to take up workshop space, will have to be socially minded and have social impact ... we want organisations to be ethical, sustainable, environmentally friendly and have the community at heart ... and [at the next stage] those tenants will have to have that similar outlook.

There were strong views on the need for more socially-responsible business in the village. In particular, the growth of private landlordism and large-scale retail was seen as having negative social consequences. The hope was the Co-op would be a game-changer in this regard.

Participants who are involved in community organisations in the village are highly focused on the importance of keeping children and young people connected to village life. They related this to the Five Ways to Well-Being method,ⁱⁱⁱ developed by the mental health charity Mind:

young people, it is just a thing that in communities like ours, there isn't really a lot to do as it is and I think the cricket job does a great job for people who want to play sport and are part of that and the Youth Project, Brownies and Guides, we do some great stuff as well.

Inclusiveness was a priority for all participants: the local Youth & Community Project was expanding to include younger and younger cohorts, and those running sports and clubs for young people were keen to keep fees as low as possible, or to offer activities on a voluntary payment basis:

We've run our coaching session through Covid, we've been running our coaching sessions free of charge, they're normally £2 for an hour, which,

again, isn't expensive by any stretch when you compare to the other local provision, whether that be football, rugby, anything else, but we're not charging because we don't want kids not to play and not come along and have fun because it's £2. And actually, even when we've been charging £2, it's the box that's just left on the side and people put it in, it's voluntary, and I think we've got to do that. The subs from the Brownies and the Guides, they're tiny, it's just running costs.

There is a real challenge, however, in keeping up connections with children once they start going to school elsewhere, since the secondary school in Sacriston has closed: 'we're going to lose a bit of our lifeblood', one participant pointed out, 'unless we work extremely hard with the junior school'.

Focus group participants are also keen to promote a sense of shared identity for the village, which was rooted in the history of the place. Festivals and cultural events are a means to community building: Remembrance Sunday, the Easter Sunday Parade, the Christmas Extravaganza, Sacriston's annual music festival, and the parade of the Sacriston colliery banner at the Durham Miners' Gala, were all mentioned as important moments to bring people together, to recognise the history and heritage of the village, and to build community in the present and future.

The missing link

Community action has been expanding in the village, in volume and scope, in response to shrinking statutory provision. New community provision is being made, for example, for new mothers, as one participant described:

so anyone who's pregnant in the village, we recognised that health visitors aren't the greatest, midwives aren't the greatest – and that's not because they're not highly skilled, it's because they've got time pressures, like everyone in the NHS. So if we can, in any way, get that intervention system in, literally, pre-birth, we've captured them straightaway.

But while community action is a vital resource, it is not enough. Participants working in a formal capacity in the village indicated the need for their formal support services to plug into local networks. As a corollary, participants organising within the community noted the importance of connections to formal institutions. This is not an either/or situation: *both* formal institutions like the local authority, housing associations, police, etc, *and* community organisations and initiatives, are needed. Local Labour councillors have been leaders in the process locally: while Labour lost control of Durham County Council in May 2021, Labour has healthy majorities in Sacriston. Some of the most important new developments in social infrastructure in Sacriston in recent years have come from the community. But big interventions are needed in areas like housing and the local economy, interventions which will need to be driven by local politicians and major local organisations like housing associations. There is no one-size-fits all approach, however: these interventions require a collaborative approach which recognises local strengths and pride in place.

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Notes

ⁱ Thanks to UCL Grand Challenges for supporting this research. For more on the project, see John Tomaney, Lucy Natarajan, and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Sacriston: Towards a deeper understanding of place*, UCL 2021: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/planning/sites/bartlett/files/sacriston_report_2021_final.pdf.

ⁱⁱ For more on this see Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, “‘Reopen the Coal Mines’? Deindustrialisation and the Labour Party’, *Political Quarterly*, advance access 6 May 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/taking-care-of-yourself/five-ways-to-wellbeing/>.