The Young Foundation

West Midlands Combined Authority

Creating truly inclusive communities

A practical approach for the West Midlands Combined Authority region

About The Young Foundation

The Young Foundation is the UK's home for community research and social innovation. As a not-for-profit, The Young Foundation brings communities, organisations and policymakers together, driving positive change to shape a fairer future.

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

For more information visit us at: youngfoundation.org

This report

This report outlines the value and importance of uniting the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) region around an ambition to create truly 'inclusive communities'.

The report is intended for a wide range of readers from individual residents and organisations in the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector; through to local authorities; the WMCA; funding organisations; and the private sector operating across the WMCA region.

The report is informed by interviews and workshops that gathered diverse views and perspectives. This process aimed to develop, test and embody key principles, serving as a demonstration of how to work in an inclusive, transparent and collaborative way.

Acknowledgements

The Young Foundation Team:

WMCA Team:

Contributors from VCFSE organisations:

Contributors from Local Authorities:

Peer Researchers:

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Foreword

I am thrilled to introduce our innovative approach to, 'Creating More Inclusive Communities.' This is a major step forward in our journey to build a region where every resident feels valued, supported, and empowered.

My priorities for our region as Mayor are clear:

- Jobs for Everyone: Creating meaningful, inclusive employment opportunities.
- Homes for Everyone: Delivering affordable, accessible housing.
- Journeys for Everyone: Making transport easy to use and open to all.
- Growth for Everyone: Ensuring economic success benefits every community

The Inclusive Communities Approach is how we intend to ensure that everyone MEANS everyone.

The West Midlands is a region of incredible diversity, rich culture, and economic potential. Our communities are vibrant and resilient, but we face challenges that require bold action and unity. This approach, developed through the collaborative efforts of our residents, the voluntary, community, faith and social economy sector (VCFSE), our local authorities and The Young Foundation, outlines how we can build inclusive communities that truly reflect the needs and aspirations of all our people.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone who contributed to this approach. Your dedication and hard work are the foundation upon which we will build a stronger, more inclusive region. Let us use this opportunity to unite and align our efforts, ensuring that the West Midlands thrives for generations to come.

I want the West Midlands to be a region where everyone regardless of background, identity, or socio-economic status, has equal access to opportunities and feels a strong sense of belonging. They are places where meaningful connections are made, reducing isolation and enhancing the social fabric of our region. This approach highlights the importance of systemic change, community-led action, and cross-sector collaboration to achieve these goals.

The Inclusive Communities Approach detailed in this document is not just a framework for thinking but a practical tool for driving action. It introduces core principles and pathways to action that emphasise building trust, enabling participation, and collaborating as equals. These principles are essential for overcoming existing barriers and making progress towards our shared ambition of a more connected, supportive, inclusive, and equitable West Midlands.

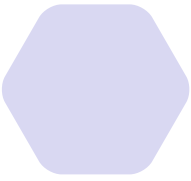The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) region, encompassing Birmingham City Council, City of Wolverhampton Council, Coventry City Council, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, and Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council, is uniquely positioned to lead this transformative effort. Each of these local authority areas brings its own strengths, and together, we can create a cohesive and inclusive region.

As we move forward, it is crucial that we continue to work together—residents, the voluntary, community faith and social economy sector (VCFSE), local authorities, businesses and policymakers alike. By prioritising long-term systemic change and working together, we can create a future where inclusive communities are not just an aspiration but a reality that shapes the everyday lives of everybody in our region.

Call to Action

We need everyone—residents, community organisations, local authorities, businesses, and policymakers—to come together, working as one to make the West Midlands a place where everyone feels included and can achieve their full potential.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Parker

Mayor of the West Midlands

Executive summary

This report outlines an inclusive communities approach for the West Midlands. This has been designed to unite and align people across the WMCA region around a shared ambition to improve the quality of life of all residents. By placing a stronger emphasis on both community-centred and resident-centred social outcomes, the approach seeks to strengthen social fabric, drive inclusive economic growth, and contribute to other regional priorities such as health and wellbeing. It highlights the need for systemic change, community-led action, and cross-sector collaboration to ensure that policies and interventions meaningfully support social capital, social infrastructure, social inclusion, and social mobility in sustainable ways, as they drive 'inclusive communities'.

Inclusive communities are those where all residents - regardless of background, identity, or socio-economic status - have equal access to social and economic opportunities. They are places that foster meaningful connections, helping people build relationships, and reducing isolation. These communities provide safe, welcoming, and attractive spaces where people feel they belong and can engage in social and civic life. They have a strong voluntary, community, faith, and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector that supports and empowers residents. Inclusive communities embrace and celebrate differences, fostering environments of trust rather than fear. They enable individuals to fulfil their potential, ensuring that personal growth and learning are not limited by background or circumstance but encouraged through accessible opportunities and supportive networks.

The WMCA area currently lags behind a number of national benchmarks on key measures of community life. While the VCFSE sector and local authorities are making progress, they're working in a tough environment. Persistent issues – such as power imbalances, and those related to funding – highlight the scale of the challenges that must be addressed to move towards four social goals that underpin the overall ambition of the inclusive communities approach – a socially connected region, a supportive region, an inclusive region and an equitable region.

As well as providing a framework for understanding the region and its priorities from a social perspective, the approach is a practical tool for driving action. It introduces three core 'action principles':

1. Build trust
2. Enable participation
3. Collaborate as equals

These principles emphasise the behaviours and new ways of working needed to overcome existing barriers and progress toward the four social goals.

Additionally, the approach presents four 'pathways to action':

1. Understand
2. Take action
3. Evaluate
4. Unite and align

These pathways encourage VCFSE organisations, the combined authority, local authorities, and others across the region to ask critical questions when delivering and planning activities. Recommendations for specific activities, to start actioning and planning now, are also outlined.

The inclusive communities approach presents a transformative opportunity to reshape social policy in the West Midlands. By prioritising long-term systemic change and fostering collaborative action, the region can create a more connected, supportive, inclusive, and equitable society. Achieving these goals requires commitment from government, business, and civil society to work together to deliver meaningful, measurable outcomes for residents.

Glossary of terms

Commonly used terms throughout this report are defined below for clarity and consistency:

» **Inclusive communities:** Communities where all residents - regardless of background, identity, or socio-economic status - have equal access to social and economic opportunities.

» **Social capital:** The network of relationships that exist between people that build local resilience, belonging and wellbeing.

» **Social infrastructure:** The organisations, institutions, services and assets that support and build communities in a region.

» **Social inclusion:** The extent to which people feel they belong in society and can participate in civic life.

» **Social mobility:** The extent to which people have a fair chance in society, and their personal development is not hindered by the circumstances of their birth.

» **Inclusive:** Describes practices, spaces, or processes that actively seek to involve and value people from all communities, especially those who are often excluded, to ensure fair access, participation, and representation.

» **Community:** A network of people, often defined or connected by geography, shared interests, identity, culture, experience, relationships, shared goals, or mutual responsibility.

» **Residents:** People who live in a particular area or location, in this case the WMCA region.

» **Accessibility:** The practice of designing environments, services, and information in ways that ensure they can be used by all individuals, including disabled people.

» **Disabled:** In this report, the terms 'disabled' and 'disability' are used in line with the social model of disability, which recognises that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairments or conditions. These barriers may be physical, attitudinal, structural, or systemic. We acknowledge that language around disability is deeply personal and can be contested. Some people prefer different terms or frameworks to describe their lived experience.

» **The West Midlands region:** The broad geographical area of the WMCA, including the surrounding counties of Staffordshire, Worcestershire and Herefordshire.

» **The WMCA area/ the WMCA region/ the region:** For the purposes of this report, these terms all refer to the area covered by the seven constituent members of the West Midlands Combined Authority: Birmingham City Council, City of Wolverhampton Council, Coventry City Council, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, and Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council.
Note: There are also 11 non-constituent members, these are: Cannock Chase District Council, North Warwickshire Borough Council, Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council, Redditch Borough Council, Rugby Borough Council, Shropshire Council, Stratford-on-Avon District Council, Tamworth Borough Council, Telford and Wrekin Council, Warwickshire County Council, Warwick District Council.

» **Local authority:** Another term for a (local) council.

» **VCFSE:** The voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector. Some organisations or programmes use the term VCSE. We use this term only where it is part of the name of an external programme of work.

Section 1: Why inclusive communities are needed

This section explores the unique context of the West Midlands and sets out what is required to improve the quality of people's lives across the region.

A vision for the region

From Coventry to Solihull and Birmingham, and from Sandwell to Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton, people should thrive in the places they live.

They should feel a strong sense of belonging through the relationships they've built with others, enabled by welcoming and supportive spaces that help bring people together. They should feel safe and integrated into their communities and be able to access the support they need to grow and learn.

The WMCA region is incredibly diverse, with rich culture, and economic potential. Home to 2.9m people, with one of the youngest populations in Europe, it has long been a place of innovation and resilience. However, rising inequality and a growing disconnect between policy and residents' experiences risk undermining its potential.

Historically, success has been measured largely through economic indicators such as growth, productivity, and investment, with GDP commonly used by successive governments in the UK and globally to assess national performance. While these traditional metrics remain important, people and communities consistently tell us they don't reflect what truly matters to them. We must now recognise the value of inclusive, safe, and supportive communities and meaningfully integrate these factors into decision-making processes.

As the page below show, it is well evidenced that social factors - such as strong relationships, a feeling of belonging, and access to high-quality inclusive opportunities and services - directly improve quality of life, and are intrinsically linked to economic measures of success.[1]

The social factors that drive inclusive communities can be grouped into four areas:

1. Social capital
2. Social infrastructure
3. Social inclusion
4. Social mobility

Throughout this report, we use these terms to guide and explore what 'inclusive communities' means for the West Midlands: how they are defined, the current context, and what 'good' looks like. This report shows how prioritising building social capital, infrastructure, inclusion and mobility can create a region where everyone has a stake, feels valued, and can thrive.

The evidence to support inclusive communities

Inclusive communities are not a 'nice to have' – they are a fundamental driver of regional success. Extensive evidence demonstrates that the factors that make up inclusive communities not only enhance individual wellbeing but also drive economic growth, improve health outcomes, and support the transition to an environmentally sustainable future. A focus on these social factors is key to unlocking the potential of the region.

Driving inclusive economic growth

Strong social trust, a key component of social capital, has been positively correlated with economic growth, with a 10% increase in social trust associated with a 1.3-1.5% rise in relative economic productivity.[2]

Social infrastructure plays a crucial role in fostering local employment and training opportunities.[3] A Frontier Economics report found that a £1m investment in social infrastructure generates £2m in Gross Value Added (GVA) over a 10-year period, driven by increased employment, improved health, and reduced crime.[4] It also yields £1.2m in fiscal benefits through tax revenue and public service savings.

Beyond direct economic gains, improved social mobility boosts productivity by ensuring better job-matching and workforce efficiency.[5] Higher social mobility leads to increased economic output and tax revenues, benefiting businesses and the broader economy.[6] Inclusion in the workplace has also been linked to higher innovation and profitability,[1] as diverse teams enhance creativity and problem-solving.

Improving health and wellbeing

Research consistently highlights the strong link between social capital and health outcomes. Socially connected individuals experience better mental and physical health and are at a lower risk of mortality.[1] Loneliness, a significant public health concern, is mitigated by strong social bonds.[2]

Living near social infrastructure is associated with higher subjective wellbeing,[7] with social cohesion and a sense of belonging playing a mediating role in this relationship.[8] Investment in social infrastructure can also support early intervention in health issues, reducing long-term costs to healthcare systems.[9]

There is also a clear relationship between social exclusion and poor mental health. High levels of exclusion are associated with increased risks of mental illness, while greater social inclusion improves overall health outcomes.[10] Furthermore, evidence suggests that adverse socioeconomic conditions contribute to ill health, reinforcing the need for policies that address social determinants of health.[11]

Supporting a just transition to net zero

As the UK moves towards a net zero economy, putting social inclusion at the heart of climate policy can avoid exacerbating inequalities. While evidence on the direct impact of inclusive communities on environmental transitions is still emerging, frameworks developed by The Young Foundation highlight the need for a 'person-centred, place-based approach' that accounts for the variable opportunities and risks faced by different households and communities in achieving a just transition.[12]

Social capital can facilitate climate adaptation and mitigation. Communities with strong networks are more resilient to climate-related disruptions and are more likely to participate in sustainable practices.[13] Investing in social mobility ensures that green jobs and skills training reach all communities, preventing further economic disparities during the transition to a low-carbon economy.

The evidence demonstrates that inclusive communities are fundamental to the long-term success of the West Midlands. Investment in inclusive communities provides measurable benefits to individuals, business and the region.

Evidence shows that challenging social, environmental and economic contexts demand a more inclusive approach to working with communities.

While the case for prioritising inclusive communities is strong, successive years of funding cuts, siloed working and unequal representation have widened inequality and created challenges that must be overcome to improve life for West Midlands residents.

Reduced funding to local authorities and civil society

Successive years of austerity have reduced funds to local authorities with extreme consequences, including the erosion of social infrastructure and community services. For example, an IPPR report showed that the public health cut in the West Midlands region from 2014 to 2021 was £106m, a cut per person of £17.80, the second highest in England.[14] Similarly, the VCFSE sector faces funding instability. Organisations often rely on short-term grants, limiting their ability to plan strategically and scale successful initiatives. A lack of sustained investment in the sector has severely weakened the foundations that underpin inclusive communities.

Systemic challenges and structural barriers

Inclusive communities are shaped by many factors - such as housing, education, and employment - which themselves reflect deeply entrenched structural inequalities. Policies and services are often designed in siloed ways, which fail to recognise the interconnected nature of social outcomes. A lack of coordination and learning between different sectors and policies can lead to fragmented efforts that do not fully address the root causes of inequalities in communities.

> "
> Funding opportunities are short-term and don't give a sustainable approach to any activitie"

Manor Farm Community Association, Walsall

> "
> Local authority funding is our biggest cause for concern. We are in an LA building and as their budgets get squeezed, maintenance becomes more of a challenge"

James, Ashmore Park Community Hub, Wolverhampton

Unrepresentative decision-making

Decision-making structures, such as local funding, often do not fully consider the voices of residents and communities. Without mechanisms enabling local people to meaningfully participate in changes that affect them, policies risk being top-down and disconnected from the realities of residents' lives. A shift toward co-production, where communities actively shape and deliver solutions, is needed. However, ensuring this shift is meaningful requires a significant cultural and institutional change.

Rising inequality and social polarisation

Growing economic inequality and political polarisation are exacerbating social divisions, making it harder to create inclusive communities. The cost-of-living crisis, digital exclusion, and insecure work have left many people struggling to meet basic needs. In this context, social cohesion can break down, leading to increased isolation and reduced tolerance. The far-right riots during the summer of 2024 are a stark reminder of what can happen when these underlying issues are left unaddressed.

An opportunity for the West Midlands

Overcoming these barriers requires bold action and a long-term commitment to inclusive communities. With a new government that has recognised the value of communities, and a devolution deal that shifts more power into the West Midlands, the region now has a unique opportunity to do things differently. Both changes present significant opportunities to enable truly inclusive communities. By shifting decision-making powers closer to the people they affect, the devolution deal enables local leaders to respond more effectively to the specific challenges and needs of residents. With increased powers over housing, transport, and skills, the region has a chance to direct investment toward interventions and activities that strengthen its social fabric.

One of the key commitments outlined in the government's December 2024 Devolution White Paper[15] is:

'We will continue to work in partnership with our most deprived communities to tackle their unique challenges. And we will look at the case for strengthening communities with greater rights to be involved in their local issues.'

This marks an important step toward those most affected by inequality having a stronger voice in shaping the policies and decisions that impact their daily lives.

In addition, the Civil Society Covenant[16] strengthens the role of VCFSE sectors in shaping local policy and delivering services. It provides a framework for collaboration between government, businesses and community organisations, recognises the distinct contributions each must make, and affirms the unique contribution civil society can make to support a better future.

This is a call to action; an invitation to view outcomes and progress from a social perspective, and to embrace a new way of working – one that builds trust, enables participation, and supports collaboration.

Inclusive communities don't happen by chance; they're built through collective effort. From policymakers and local authorities to businesses, community groups, and residents, everyone has a role to play. If we want the West Midlands to thrive, we must work together to create environments where people feel valued, supported, and empowered.

Section 2: A 'snapshot' of community life in the West Midlands

This section outlines what community life in the West Midlands is like in 2024, establishing a quantitative baseline for measuring future progress, and supplementing it with qualitative community and resident-centred data.

Creating a snapshot to act as a baseline

Alongside development of the inclusive communities approach, work was carried out to gather insight, evidence and data to determine how to understand the state of communities in the WMCA region, and to establish a baseline to measure progress against.

Deciding on a method for gathering data and tracking changes over time required finding the right balance between what would be most useful, and what would be most practical. Quantitative indicators were considered that would allow different aspects of inclusive communities to be measured. Specific indicators were then selected for inclusion in the baseline based on the granularity, comparability, and long-term availability of the data. Currently, existing data for the selected indicators is only available at a local authority level. Future iterations of the approach may incorporate data at a ward or Lower Layer Super Output Area (LSOA) level, if considered useful and practical. Further detail around selection of the indicators can be found in Section 1 of the appendix.

Quantitative barometers supplemented by qualitative data

To measure progress, each of the four social goals within the inclusive communities approach includes one 'key barometer'. Together, these barometers provide a top-level 'pulse of the region', allowing the social fabric of the WMCA area to be understood at a glance, and for comparisons to be made with the national averages. Three 'supporting barometers' are included within each goal, to be used when further depth and breadth is needed. To ensure clarity in the main body of the report, source data for all barometers is provided in the appendix, section 1.

Understanding what life is really like for residents requires more than quantitative data, and more than just a regional perspective. It is essential to also take community- and resident-centred perspectives, to understand what residents think, feel, and do. These insights, including those gathered through peer research and participants from the VCFSE sector, have been presented as eight fictional 'personas' (see page 28), representing the spectrum of experiences and challenges faced by residents. They are crucial to the overall 'snapshot' and help shape how we understand inclusive communities.
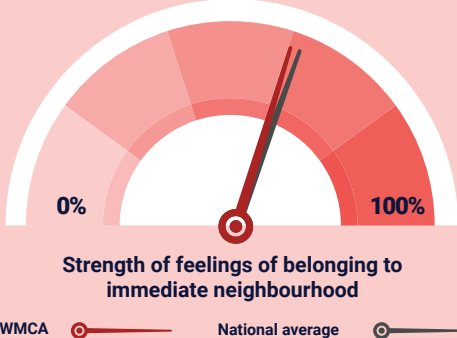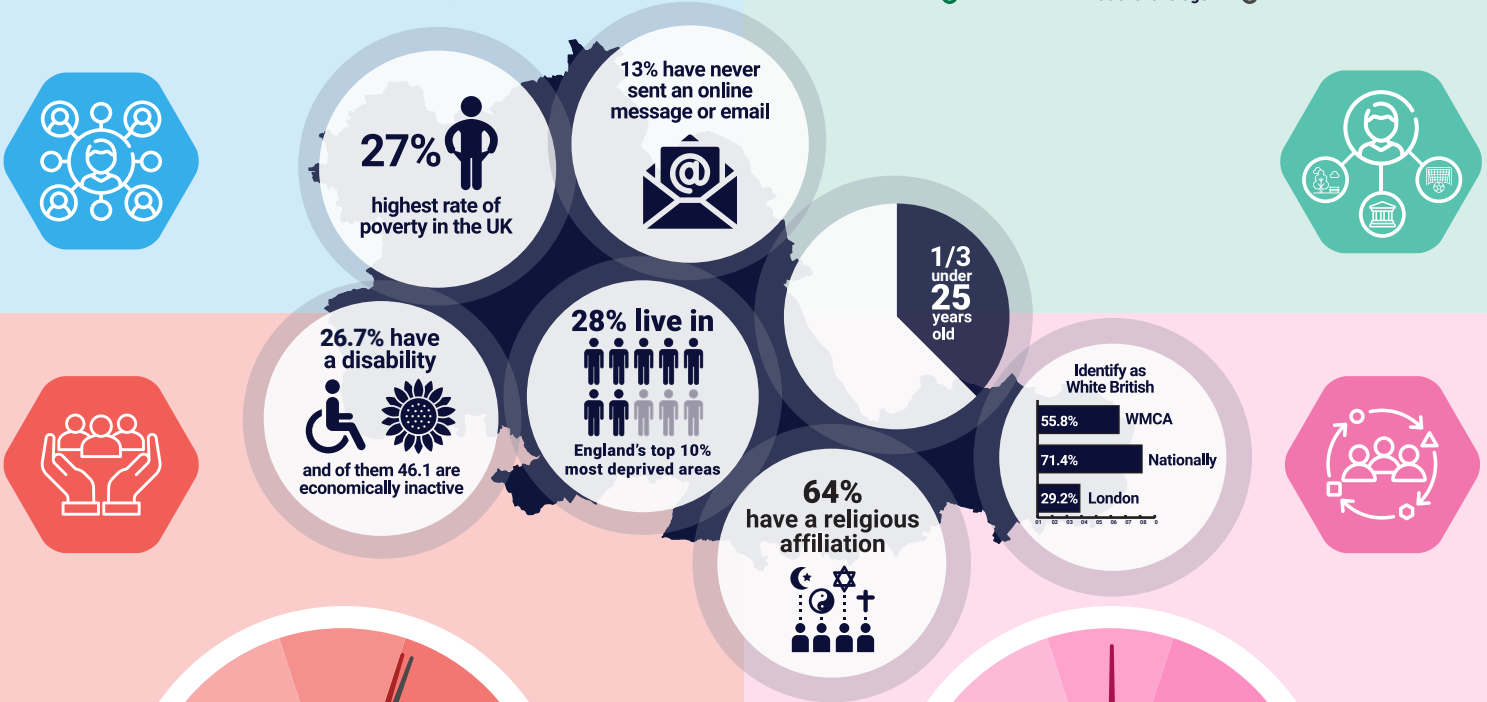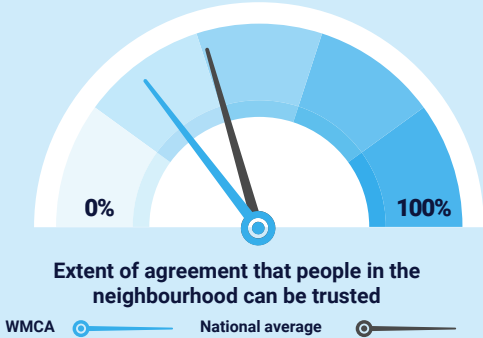
Goal: a socially connected region

For residents this means: Being part of communities that help people connect and build relationships with others, and don't let people feel alone and isolated

Key barometer for monitoring change: % people who feel most or some of the people who live in their local neighbourhood can be trusted

Pulse of the region: 37% of adults in the WMCA region trust people in their neighbourhood, compared to 41% nationally

0%   100%

Extent of agreement that people in the neighbourhood can be trusted

WMCA — National average

Goal: a supportive region

For residents this means: Being part of communities that provide access to attractive, safe, welcoming spaces, and don't inhibit daily life

Key barometer for monitoring change: Attractiveness of local area

Pulse of the region: 41% of adults in the WMCA region agree that their local area is attractive, compared to 57% nationally

0%   100%

Attractiveness of local area

WMCA — National average

27% highest rate of poverty in the UK

13% have never sent an online message or email

26.7% have a disability and of them 46.1 are economically inactive

28% live in England's top 10% most deprived areas

1/3 under 25 years old

Identify as White British
55.8% WMCA
71.4% Nationally
29.2% London

64% have a religious affiliation

0%   100%

Strength of feelings of belonging to immediate neighbourhood

WMCA — National average

Low   High

Promising prospects index

WMCA — National average

Goal: an inclusive region

For residents this means: Being part of communities that celebrate differences and don't spark fear in those from different backgrounds

Key barometer for monitoring change: Strength of feelings of belonging to immediate neighbourhood

Pulse of the region: 60% of adults in the WMCA region report a strong feeling of belonging to their immediate neighbourhood. This is comparable with the national figure (61%)

Goal: an equitable region

For residents this means: Being part of communities that enable people to fulfil their potential no matter what their background or circumstances, and don't inhibit personal growth

Key barometer for monitoring change: Promising prospects index

Pulse of the region: All regions in England fall close to average on the Social Mobility Commission's Indices

Comparisons between regions are not advised. See the maps later in this section for comparisons within the WMCA area.

The situation in the WMCA area

The very things that make the WMCA unique and worthy of celebration are the same things that, upon closer examination, highlight the challenges being faced. Although the WMCA area is one of the most diverse in the country, this diversity has not resulted in greater inclusion or improved outcomes for marginalised communities. Instead, disparities are starker than the national average. Black and Pakistani residents are significantly more likely to live in deprived neighbourhoods, disabled people face greater economic inactivity, and digital exclusion is more widespread. Rather than greater diversity fostering greater understanding or opportunity, structural inequalities persist, reinforcing barriers for many residents.

Deepening understanding of community life with four social goals

Across each of the goals, current data indicates community life in the WMCA region falls short when compared to national figures and other combined authority regions. Each of the four key barometers, representing a different perspective of what makes an inclusive community, show that the WMCA area is close to, or frequently in a less favourable position than, the UK average. In interviews and workshops underpinning this report, people living and working in the region's communities said a common set of foundations were lacking, covering accessibility, support, safety, diversity and relationships (with each other and with government and institutions).

The following is a further exploration of the 'snapshot' through each of the four social goals.

Goal: A socially connected region

For residents this means: Being part of communities that help people connect and build relationships with others, and don't let people feel alone and isolated.

This goal is underpinned by the concept of **social capital**.

How practitioners define it: The network of relationships that exist between people in the West Midlands, that build local resilience, cohesion and wellbeing. This includes the bonds within communities, the bridges between different groups, and the links between communities and institutions holding authority and power.

Key barometer for monitoring change

Extent of agreement that people in the neighbourhood can be trusted

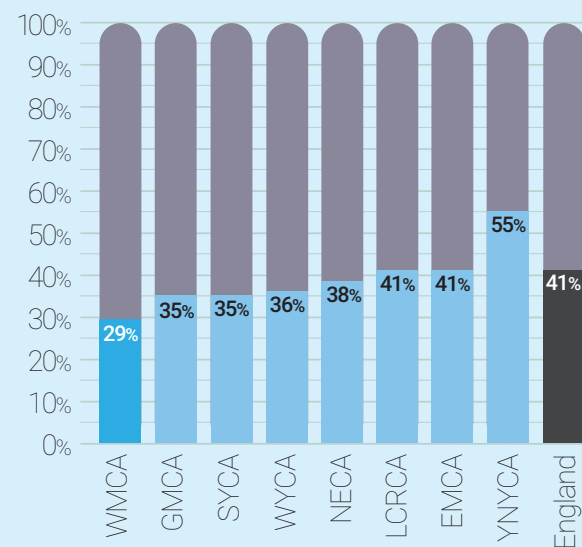WMCA ○—— National average ○——

Figure 1
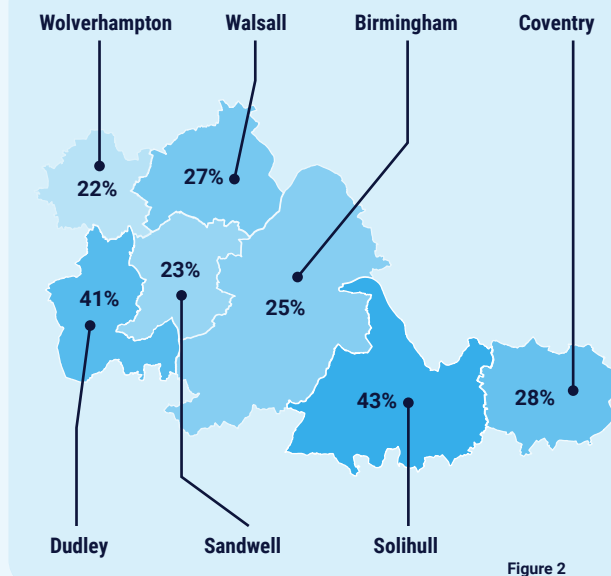
The current state of social capital in the region:

Fewer adults in the WMCA region (29%) trust people in their neighbourhood, compared to nationally (41%) and comparison combined authority regions (figure 1). Overall, the percentage of adults who feel most or some of the people who live in their local neighbourhood can be trusted ranged from 22% in Wolverhampton to 43% in Solihull (figure 2).

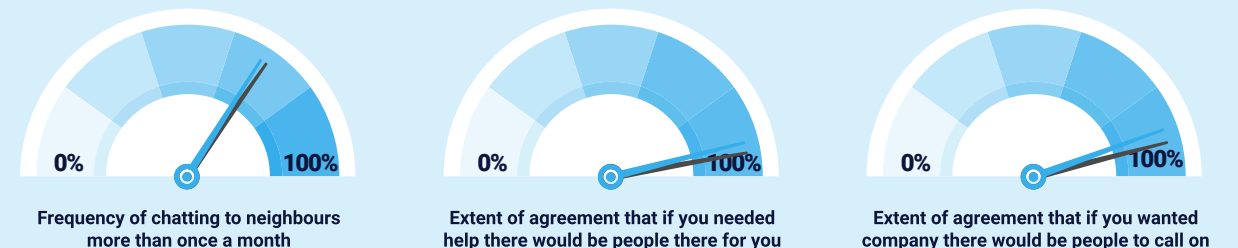## Trust in people in neighbourhood

By Combined Authority (2023/24)

WMCA 29% | GMCA 35% | SYCA 35% | WYCA 36% | NECA 38% | LCRCA 41% | EMCA 41% | YNYCA 55% | England 41%

Local Authority variation

Wolverhampton 22% | Walsall 27% | Birmingham 25% | Coventry 28% | Dudley 41% | Sandwell 23% | Solihull 43%

Figure 2

Residents told us pockets of trust and connectedness are inconsistent, and not necessarily experienced by all across a specific place. Some residents particularly expressed concern about opportunities for meaningful connection with and for marginalised groups, such as migrants and disabled people.

Across residents and VCSFE representatives, it is also clear that a fresh approach is desired for relationships between communities and local institutions holding power and authority – referred to as 'linking social capital' in academic literature. They desire two-way dialogue between communities and local authorities; and want to ensure that residents and community organisation have ownership and agency, with appropriate resources and support to build capacity for engagement.

Supporting barometers for monitoring change

Frequency of chatting to neighbours more than once a month

Extent of agreement that if you needed help there would be people there for you

Extent of agreement that if you wanted company there would be people to call on

WMCA ○—— National average ○——

> "If you're coming from a place where you don't have those connections, you know it can be more difficult to gain them and know who you need to speak to."
>
> **Resident, Walsall**

> "I think we should balance things with how we want the UK economy to grow. They (the council) should also consider people's basic needs and amenities and talk to us about our housing conditions. It will go a long way as well because we add value to the country a lot, a lot of migrants and the citizens."
>
> **Resident, Wolverhampton**

> "We found our way to the church and community, and that's really our social network, I guess kind of working out from there and getting to know different people through work and stuff. But, I think if it wasn't for that, we'd have been on our own, really quite a lot."
>
> **Resident, Coventry**

Goal: A supportive region

For residents this means: being part of communities that provide access to attractive, safe, welcoming spaces, and have a strong VCFSE sector.

This goal is underpinned by the concept of **social infrastructure**.

How practitioners define it: The organisations, institutions, services and assets that support and build communities in the region. This includes social businesses and charities, green and blue spaces, sports infrastructures, cultural infrastructures and other community spaces that facilitate social connection.

Key barometer for monitoring change

Attractiveness of local area

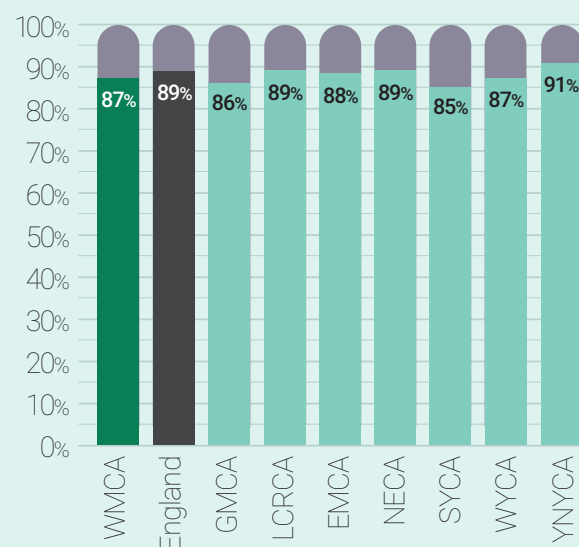WMCA ⊙——— National average ⊙———
Figure 3
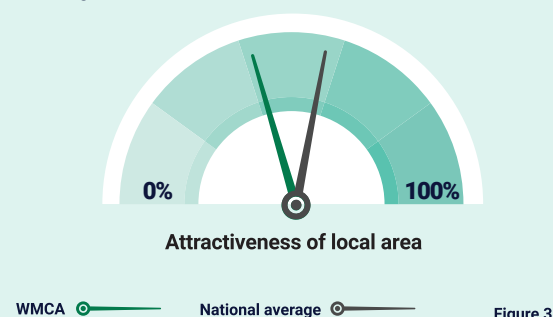
The current state of social infrastructure in the region:
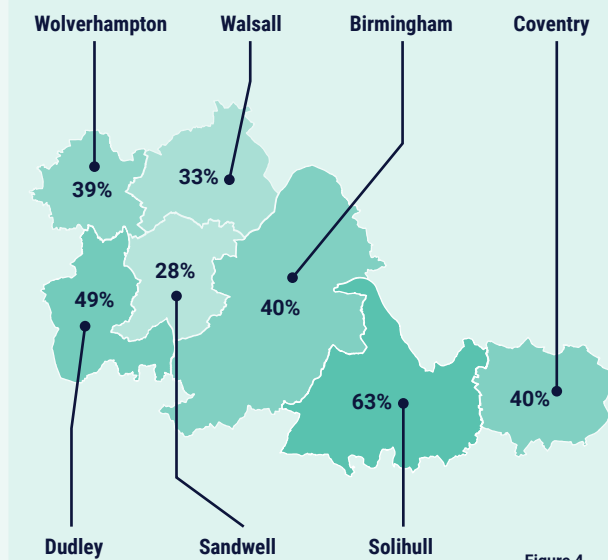
Overall, fewer adults in the WMCA region agreed that their local area was attractive (41%), compared to nationally (57%) and other combined authority comparisons (figure 3). Within the region, this ranged from 28% in Sandwell to 63% in Solihull (figure 4).
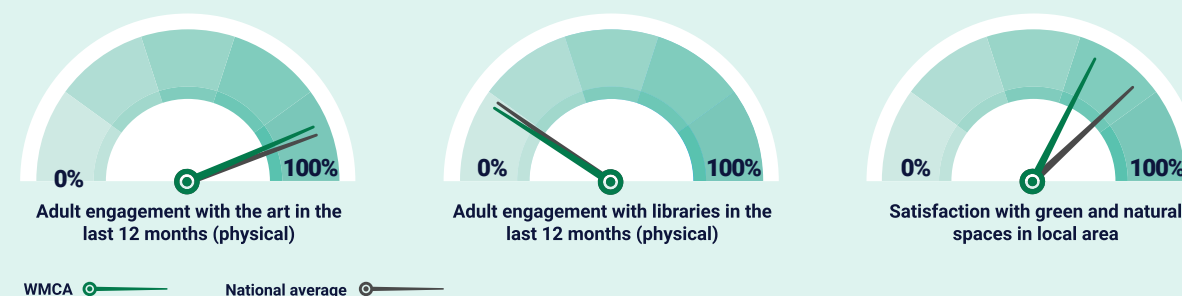
Attractiveness of local area
By Combined Authority (2023/24)

Local Authority variation

Wolverhampton 39%
Walsall 33%
Birmingham 40%
Coventry 40%
Dudley 49%
Sandwell 28%
Solihull 63%

Figure 4

Supporting barometers for monitoring change

Adult engagement with the art in the last 12 months (physical) 0% 100%

Adult engagement with libraries in the last 12 months (physical) 0% 100%

Satisfaction with green and natural spaces in local area 0% 100%

WMCA ⊙——— National average ⊙———

There are a wide variety of types of social infrastructure in the WMCA region (e.g. see WMCA's cultural infrastructure map) however, bar watching live sports, adults in the region tend to engage less with cultural social infrastructures, compared to the national average for England (figure 5).

% of adults participating

Engaged with in-person arts activity or event in last 12 months
WMCA 87%, England 89%, GMCA 86%, LCRCA 89%, EMCA 88%, NECA 89%, SYCA 85%, WYCA 87%, YNYCA 91%

Watched live sports in-person in last six months
WMCA 23%, England 22%, GMCA 22%, LCRCA 25%, EMCA 20%, NECA 22%, SYCA 22%, WYCA 20%, YNYCA 22%

Visited a library in-person in last 12 months
WMCA 18%, England 19%, GMCA 20%, LCRCA 18%, EMCA 17%, NECA 15%, SYCA 15%, WYCA 17%, YNYCA 21%

Figure 5

For those residents that use social infrastructure, and the VCSFE organisations that provide these, it is clear the benefits they bring – including in relation to the other social concepts.

However, it is also apparent that residents feel social infrastructure in the region has been declining, both in number and quality. VCSFE representatives shared that maintaining social infrastructures has become increasingly challenging as their contributions have been undervalued due to funding cuts and through procurement decisions.

In terms of green and natural spaces, a similar pattern emerges. Fewer adults in the WMCA region (65%) report being satisfied with the green and natural spaces in their local area, compared to nationally (76%) and other combined authority regions (figure 6). Satisfaction is highest in Solihull (76%) and lowest in Sandwell (59%) (figure 7) with 2021 analysis from the New Economics Foundation highlighting inequalities in access to green spaces across the region.
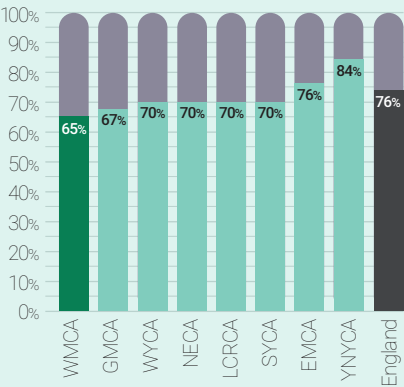
Satisfaction with green and natural spaces in local area, by CA

Figure 6

Map of LA variation

Figure 7

"Because we also have places like the football clubs, fitness centres, these are actually places that brings about social capital, brings a lot of people together, creates a lot of connection and interactions with people."
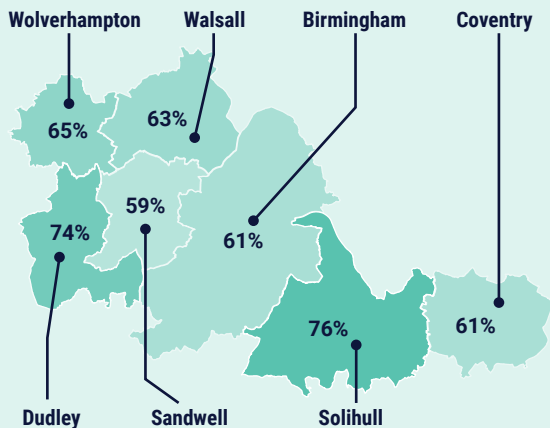
Resident, Solihull

"I have lived here for over 8 years. At the start we had support from the housing group to integrate community to make some events. Then six years ago, we stopped getting funds for that. It made social inclusion in Walsall very difficult."

Resident, Walsall

"In Birmingham, there's a lot of opportunities ...a lot of different places and a lot of different environments. But the problem is that these environments and these places and opportunities or facilities, they're not well maintained or sustained."
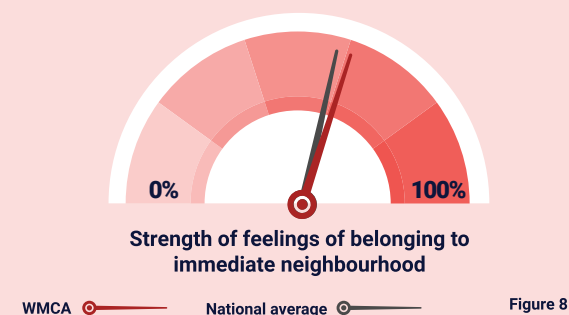
Resident, Birmingham

Goal: An inclusive region

For residents this means: being part of welcoming communities that celebrate differences and don't spark fear in those from different backgrounds.

This goal is underpinned by the concept of **social inclusion**.

How practitioners define it: The extent to which people feel they belong in society and can participate in civic life.
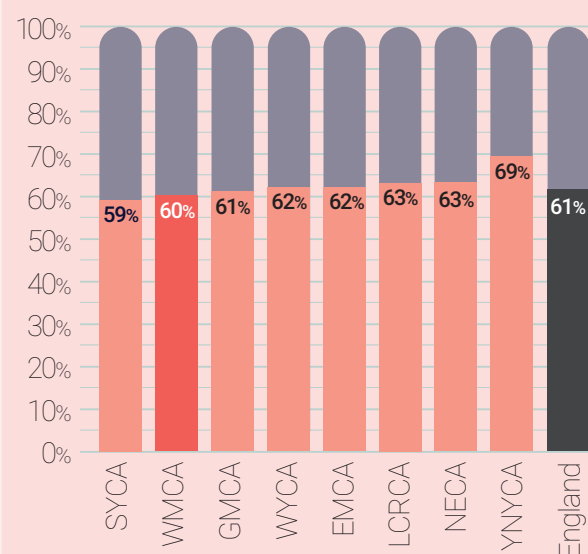
Key barometer for monitoring change

Strength of feelings of belonging to immediate neighbourhood
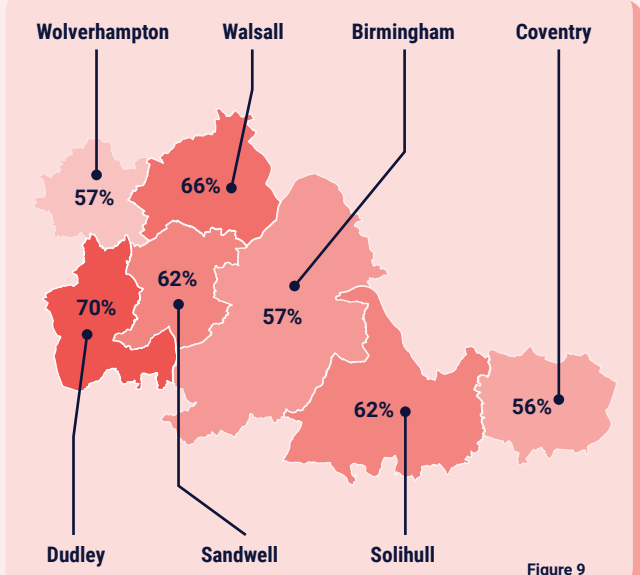
WMCA ⊙──── National average ⊙──── Figure 8

The current state of social inclusion in the region:

WMCA is generally perceived to be an inclusive region, with residents highlighting that it fosters a sense of belonging and support across diverse groups. 60% of adults in the WMCA region report a strong feeling of belonging to their immediate neighbourhood. This is comparable with the national figure (61%) and other combined authorities (figure 8). Across the WMCA region, feelings of belonging ranged from 70% in Dudley to 56% in Coventry (figure 9).

Strength of feelings of belonging to immediate neighbourhood
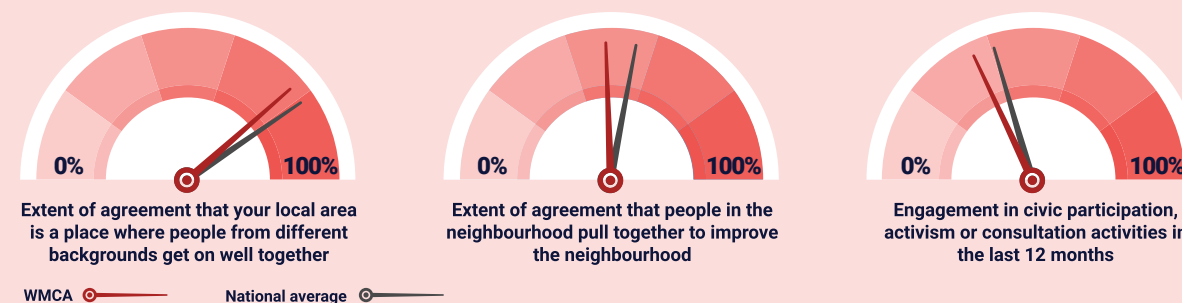
By Combined Authority (2023/24)

SYCA	WMCA	GMCA	WYCA	EMCA	LCRCA	NECA	YNYCA	England
59%	60%	61%	62%	62%	63%	63%	69%	61%

Local Authority variation

Wolverhampton 57%
Walsall 66%
Birmingham 57%
Coventry 56%
Dudley 70%
Sandwell 62%
Solihull 62%

Figure 9

However, there are still gaps in this, especially for some marginalised groups who told us they feel they're not as included within certain spaces, primarily due to issues surrounding cultural and language barriers. Engagements with local VCSFE representatives highlighted the idea that tailored support is needed to accommodate individuals' specific needs. This helps to unlock the ability for people to use their unique skills, and move beyond merely accepting difference, to instead valuing and celebrating it. Community organisations are often expert at building relationships that enable this person-centred approach, which can cultivate a feeling of belonging.

Supporting barometers for monitoring change

Extent of agreement that your local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together

Extent of agreement that people in the neighbourhood pull together to improve the neighbourhood

Engagement in civic participation, activism or consultation activities in the last 12 months

WMCA ⊙──── National average ⊙────

"In Wolverhampton the key thing I really love is the diverse community that we have. People from various cultural backgrounds coming together from different places, countries and becoming residents of Wolverhampton."

Resident, Wolverhampton
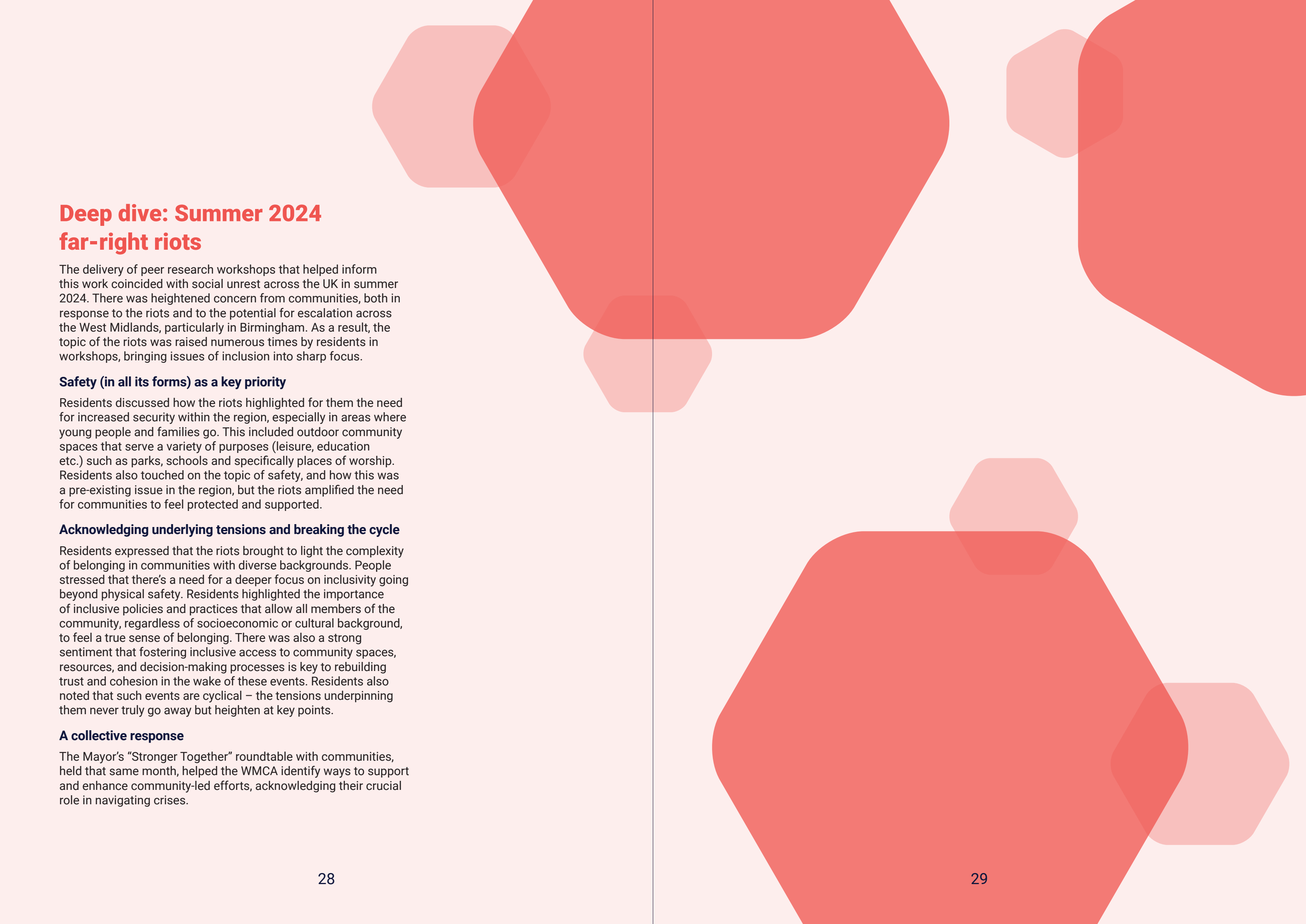
"For me, I would like to say that inclusion, it's the process of ensuring all individuals, irrespective of the cultural background, the identities and the circumstances, and giving them equal access to resources. And you shouldn't give any room for discrimination. You should not bring racism. Rather they should be included and also have accessibility and participation in any activity."

Resident, Birmingham

"I didn't feel very comfortable speaking in English [to a therapist], even if I could understand everything she was she was saying, I didn't feel that person very close to me in terms of what I needed at that time."

Resident, Walsall

Deep dive: Summer 2024 far-right riots

The delivery of peer research workshops that helped inform this work coincided with social unrest across the UK in summer 2024. There was heightened concern from communities, both in response to the riots and to the potential for escalation across the West Midlands, particularly in Birmingham. As a result, the topic of the riots was raised numerous times by residents in workshops, bringing issues of inclusion into sharp focus.

Safety (in all its forms) as a key priority

Residents discussed how the riots highlighted for them the need for increased security within the region, especially in areas where young people and families go. This included outdoor community spaces that serve a variety of purposes (leisure, education etc.) such as parks, schools and specifically places of worship. Residents also touched on the topic of safety, and how this was a pre-existing issue in the region, but the riots amplified the need for communities to feel protected and supported.

Acknowledging underlying tensions and breaking the cycle

Residents expressed that the riots brought to light the complexity of belonging in communities with diverse backgrounds. People stressed that there's a need for a deeper focus on inclusivity going beyond physical safety. Residents highlighted the importance of inclusive policies and practices that allow all members of the community, regardless of socioeconomic or cultural background, to feel a true sense of belonging. There was also a strong sentiment that fostering inclusive access to community spaces, resources, and decision-making processes is key to rebuilding trust and cohesion in the wake of these events. Residents also noted that such events are cyclical – the tensions underpinning them never truly go away but heighten at key points.

A collective response

The Mayor's "Stronger Together" roundtable with communities, held that same month, helped the WMCA identify ways to support and enhance community-led efforts, acknowledging their crucial role in navigating crises.

Goal: An equitable region

For residents this means: being part of communities that enable people to fulfil their potential no matter what their background or circumstances, and don't inhibit personal growth.

This goal is underpinned by the concept of **social mobility**.

How practitioners define it: The extent to which people have a fair chance in society and their personal development is not hindered by the circumstances of their birth.
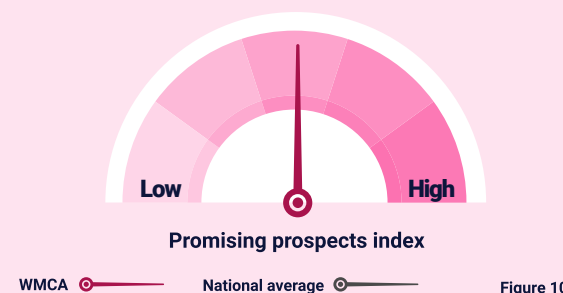
Key barometer for monitoring change

Promising prospects index

WMCA ⊙   National average ⊙   Figure 10

The current state of social mobility in the region:

The Social Mobility Commission has developed indices which identify differences in the outcomes and drivers of social mobility across local areas in the UK. While they caution against making comparisons across regions, as most regions are close to average, there are some local areas in the WMCA region that stand out in some indices for 2024 (figure 10).
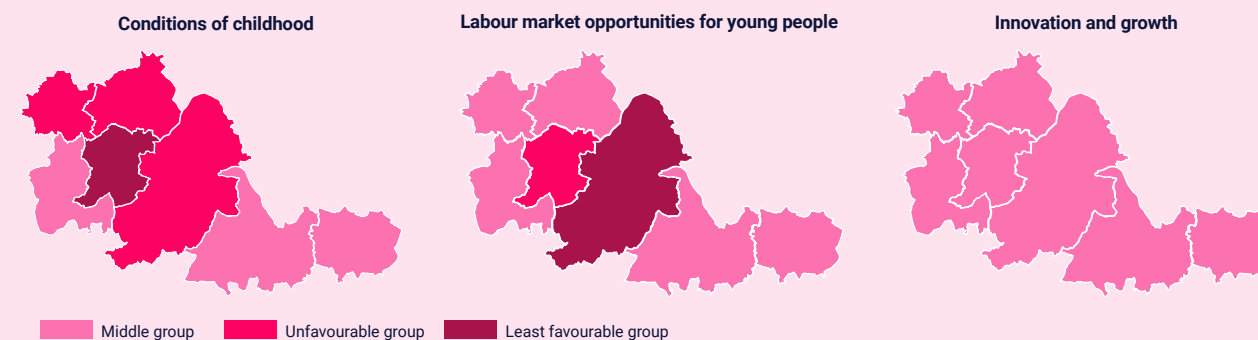
Promising prospects

Middle group   Unfavourable group   Least favourable group
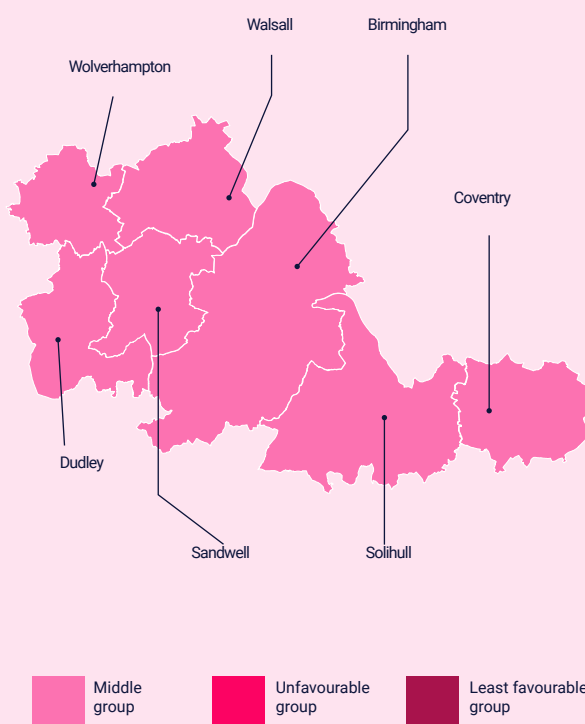
For each index, 203 local areas in the UK were classified into one of five groups, based on a composite score which brings together multiple data points.

Most local areas fall within the 'middle group' of these indices – for example, all local areas in the WMCA region are in the middle group for the 'promising prospects' index, which identifies intermediate mobility outcomes including highest qualifications, hourly earnings, and also the professional and working-class occupations of young people. Likewise, all areas in the region are within the 'middle group' for the 'innovation and growth' index, which considers broadband speed, business expenditure on research and development, and postgraduate education as drivers of social mobility.

Supporting barometers

Conditions of childhood

Labour market opportunities for young people

Innovation and growth

Middle group   Unfavourable group   Least favourable group

However, four of the seven local areas in the WMCA region are among the unfavourable groups for the 'conditions of childhood' index, with Sandwell falling within the least favourable group across the UK. This index covers childhood poverty alongside parental education and occupation. In addition, Sandwell is among the unfavourable group, and Birmingham among the least favourable group, for the 'labour market opportunities for young people' index. This looks at youth unemployment and types of employment for young people. **No areas in the WMCA region were among the favourable or most favourable groups for any of the indices in 2024**.

Building on this, residents told us that, even where opportunities existed, the accessibility of these could sometimes be a problem. Additionally, adequate infrastructure and services are not always in place to support them, and pathways for support do not always account for people's different needs

(particularly for language and neurodiversity). Supporting this, representatives from local VCSFE organisations wanted to highlight the systemic nature of barriers to social mobility rather than a focus on individuals' circumstances.

In general, communities felt a more expansive understanding of social mobility was needed, than is necessarily captured in the Social Mobility Commission's indices. Beyond a narrow focus on academic and vocational skills and opportunities, residents and VCSFE organisations alike wanted to enhance skills and conditions that improved quality of life, and let people be themselves, feel part of a community, and excel in ways that are important to them (e.g. kindness, courage and creativity). Rather than just focusing on future generations, they also wanted to ensure improved conditions and opportunities benefit people of all ages and generations.

> "There are many young people who want to have more apprenticeship opportunities but don't have the means to attend interviews. A small step towards building the future of the youth could be to cover the cost of transport for work-related opportunities"
>
> **Resident, Birmingham**

> "Access to free bus passes school uniforms and ESOL lessons would greatly support migrant communities with social inclusion and social mobility."
>
> **Resident, Wolverhampton**

> "Social mobility means to me how free are you to be yourselves? So how free are you to, like, move around and not worry about anyone else's opinion or what they think about you?"
>
> **Resident, Birmingham**

Understanding the current situation from a resident-centred perspective

Within any given area, community, or street, one person's experience of life can vary significantly from someone else's. It is therefore important to consider the perspective of different residents in understanding what community life is really like.

For this report, eight fictional personas have been created to illustrate the range of experiences and challenges faced by different residents in communities across the West Midlands. They aren't based on specific individuals, but have been created by considering broader patterns, trends, and insights gathered through understanding the stories and experiences of many.

All but one of the personas are set in one of the seven WMCA local authorities, but the examples described are not unique to the areas mentioned; residents across different parts of the West Midlands may have similar lived experiences

Bob, 42

Lives: On the border of two Local Authorities

Family: Married with 2 children aged 8 and 10

Spends time: Works full time as an office manager, enjoys going to music concerts.

Understanding Bob's life: Has the motivation and desire to be an active part of his community, but has a busy and tiring work and family life which limits what he can do.

Snapshot of life: Wants his children to have access to more opportunities for meeting others and doing new activities, but money is tight. He and his neighbours have ideas for things that would improve their area, such as creating a community centre in a disued building, but they've struggled to know who to go to in the council and how to make progress.

Amandeep, 35

Lives: Sandwell

Family: Married with 3 children ages 3-7

Spends time: Works as a building surveyor, enjoys going to the cinema.

Understanding Amandeep's life: Just bought his first home in Sandwell after years of renting in different places across the West Midlands. One of his children has a physical disability, requiring extra care and frequent visits to the hospital.
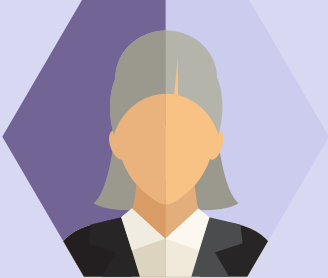
Snapshot of life: Wants to tackle local safety issues but didn't know where to start. Felt frustrated in his attempts to engage with the council, not having a clear point of contact or time to pursue this. At a neighbourhood meeting in a local hall, he met an active campaign group with experience in connecting with the council. Is now collaborating with his neighbours, the council and police to improve safety.

Michael, 21

Lives: Birmingham

Family: Lives with parents

Spends time: Unemployed and receiving benefits for his mental health, he does enjoy watching the football, online gaming.

Understanding Michael's life: Since leaving college, Michael has struggled to find work and feels increasingly isolated. His mental health has taken a hit, and he's unsure where to turn.

Snapshot of life: Michael increasingly spends more time at home gaming, as he doesn't have the money to go out to join his friends who have jobs and disposable income. He would love to get a job that combines his passions, but he doesn't know where to find information about this. A local group that combines sport, peer support, and career advice could give Michael purpose, routine, and the confidence to move forward.

Patricia, 62

Lives: Wolverhampton

Family: Lives with her mother, who is in her 90s and has dementia. She has an older sister who lives in another part of the country

Spends time: Former teacher, now full-time carer for her mother; enjoys gardening when she has time.

Understanding Patricia's life: Patricia has been a full-time carer for her mother for several years. The emotional and physical demands of caregiving have taken a toll, and she has often felt isolated. She has had to give up work and finds it difficult to balance her responsibilities with her own wellbeing.

Snapshot of life: Through a friend, Patricia discovered a dementia-friendly walking group that provides a chance for both her and her mother to socialise. Attending the group has helped her feel less alone, and she has started to build a small support network with other carers. However, she still struggles to find local support that acknowledges the challenges of long-term caregiving.

Maureen, 53

Lives: Walsall

Family: Lives alone, has an adult son who lives in another town

Spends time: Works as a retail assistant, enjoys watching TV.

Understanding Maureen's life: Maureen has struggled with her health for years due to poor diet, lack of physical activity, and social isolation. Frequent GP visits for conditions like high blood pressure and joint pain became a routine part of her life. She felt disconnected from her community and didn't know where to start to make changes.

Snapshot of life: Maureen discovered a local wellbeing hub through a leaflet at her pharmacy, offering gentle exercise, cooking sessions, and a welcoming space. Though hesitant at first, she joined a walking group and a "cook and chat" class, slowly building confidence and connection. Now, she looks forward to Thursdays—not just for the activities, but for the friendships that have helped her feel seen and supported.

John, 58

Lives: Solihull

Family: Lives with his wife. Has two grown up children, and two young grandchildren, who live in different parts of the West Midlands

Spends time: Former manufacturing operative; enjoys watching cricket in the summer months.

Understanding John's life: John has been out of work for several years and has found it difficult to adapt to an increasingly digital world. His lack of digital skills made it challenging to apply for jobs, book medical appointments, and access services.

Snapshot of life: A local digital training programme, based within walking distance of his home, has given John confidence in using technology. He can now apply for jobs online, access healthcare more easily, and use digital banking. The programme has helped him feel less isolated, as he now interacts regularly with others in a familiar, welcoming space.

Maryam, 26

Lives: Coventry

Family: Lives with her husband; her wider family is abroad

Spends time: Works as a customer service advisor for a utility company, and enjoys trying new foods.

Understanding Maryam's life: Maryam moved to Coventry two years ago and initially struggled to feel part of the community. While her neighbourhood is diverse, she had not met anyone from her own background, felt isolated and experienced some discrimination because of her race and religion. Without strong English skills, she found it difficult to engage with services or employment opportunities.

Snapshot of life: Finding a community group with people from her home country gave Maryam confidence and a sense of belonging. With their support, she joined English language classes and secured a job. She has since made friends from a range of backgrounds and continues to volunteer, helping others who are new to the area.

Aisha, 39

Lives: Birmingham

Family: Single mother of three children aged 5, 8, and 10

Spends time: Works as a home care assistant while balancing childcare; enjoys listening to audiobooks.

Understanding Aisha's life: Aisha is a social housing tenant, raising her children on a low income while working part-time. Managing childcare and household responsibilities means she has little time for social engagement or skills development. She wants to improve her job prospects but struggles to find opportunities that fit around her responsibilities.

Snapshot of life: After learning about a holiday club at a community hub, Aisha discovered training courses available in the same location. With childcare provided, she was able to develop new skills without adding to her workload. She has since built friendships and developed more confidence in pursuing her own ambitions, not just those of her children.

Strengths in the region

Despite challenges, there are many examples of strength: people who are thriving, motivated individuals making a difference in their communities, and committed organisations who are going above and beyond to work together to support them.

Local authorities across the West Midlands are innovating and collaborating in different ways. Birmingham and Solihull councils partnered with a variety of organisations to develop a clear pathway to entry-level employment in the NHS,[17] whilst Sandwell Council recently launched a five-year Better Research for Better Health programme, bringing in £5m funding from the National Institute for Health and Care Research, to 'strengthen how we use research and evidence to make decisions, considering the needs and values of our diverse communities.'[18] Dudley Council aims to foster regeneration through the Very Light Rail Innovation Centre[19] and the DY5 Business and Innovation Enterprise Zone.[20] Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Coventry are collaborating on the 5PRING initiative to leverage 5G technology to improve public services [21]. Similarly, the Smart Cities accelerator is in place to enable local authorities such as the City of Wolverhampton and Walsall to use 5G to collaborate on solutions for health and social care, public services and public safety.[22] These are just a few of the many examples of existing initiatives involving collaboration and innovative thinking already taking place across the region.

Local authorities are addressing the challenges of enabling inclusive communities from multiple angles, as social issues often span departments and organisational structures. While Councils for Voluntary Service enhance residents' quality of life by supporting local VCFSE organisations, other initiatives are being delivered through public health programmes or within the broader context of placemaking and regeneration.

Inter-council collaboration in the Black Country

The Black Country Partnership VCSE Alliance[22] is a collaboration between the four Black Country councils: Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall, and Wolverhampton, and the Black Country Integrated Care System (ICS).

The alliance serves as a forum for the 4,000 VCFSE organisations across the Black Country to engage with NHS partners and to have a voice in strategic decision-making.

The objectives of the alliance are to influence strategic decisions by integrating local expertise into health and care strategies to improve population health and wellbeing; to enhance service delivery by collaborating with NHS partners to refine services and address health inequalities; and to foster community engagement by strengthening connections between public sector bodies and organisations with strong links to their communities, to promote better cohesion.

This partnership means health and social care services in the region are better informed, and can draw from a wider range of diverse perspectives.

Community-led insights for decision-making in Coventry

Coventry City Council is one of 30 local authorities across the UK that has been awarded funding by NIHR to establish a Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC).[23] The HDRC is 'establishing a research infrastructure to reduce health inequalities and improve the health of Coventry residents.' It seeks to include community-led insight in decision making, and to build capacity within the council to enable this. The programme aims to tackle the causes of poor health, not just its symptoms, by focusing on social determinants such as housing, employment, and digital access. The collaboration also aims to embed 'a culture of research and evidence-informed decision making' in the council. This work is aligned with One Coventry Priorities and the related Marmot Principles that, as one of the first Marmot cities,[24] Coventry helped to develop.

The power of green and welcoming spaces in Walsall

At Manor Farm Community Association, the creation of a bereavement garden has turned an overgrown area into a shared community resource. Originally founded for people who had suffered bereavement to come together, the group built and now maintain the garden together, and the process has created a supportive network and lasting friendships. The Forget-me-not garden was created as a memorial for lost loved ones, with a service taking place there every year, but is also a green space that can be used by all and has served as an educational resource for local people to learn about gardening and nature. The space also serves as a way of signposting and drawing attention to the wider work the community centre undertakes, creating a virtuous circle.

Bringing a community together in Wolverhampton

Ashmore Park Community Association in Wolverhampton is run by volunteers and has been working for and with the community of Ashmore Park since 1996. The Hub is home to a community centre, library and fitness centre, providing affordable facilities to local people and organisations. By providing spaces for people to come together and connect, it's helped to create a strong and thriving community. In June 2017, The Hub was awarded the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service to recognise outstanding work done in the community.

"Social infrastructure is our core purpose, as we run a community hub, ...Everything relates to the fact we have infrastructure."

– James, Ashmore Park Community Hub, Wolverhampton.

Meeting the long-term needs of care leavers in Birmingham

Those who have been in the care system can face many barriers throughout their life, but as they grow older support is often less available to help them address the challenges that they continue to face.

The Birmingham-based charity Bfriends is working with Leah Hudson, a grant awardee from the Ideas Made Real programme.[25] Leah is a care-experienced young person who wants to use her experience and knowledge to support other care leavers and people in the care system. As part of the funding she received, Leah developed an event and website in partnership with Bfriends, with a focus on civic participation, skills and employability, to help support care leavers as they transition out of the system. Initiatives such as this demonstrate the importance of long-term thinking and considering the needs of residents of all backgrounds.

The benefits of tackling digital exclusion in Birmingham

Smartlyte – Get Families Talking works to tackle digital exclusion by providing support and learning in welcoming and familiar places in communities across the West Midlands. When a person doesn't have access to the technology, skills, or understanding required to apply for or use a service, they aren't able to access that service. The impact of this can be huge, both for the individual whose needs are not being met, but also for other public services and VCFSE organisations, who are often left with dealing with subsequent problems.

"One elderly woman came to a surgery to learn how to use the NHS App, said she wouldn't leave until she'd understood it and went on to become an advocate for the app in her care home, teaching others how to use the technology, and saving everyone huge amounts of time on hold on the phone waiting to make an appointment that was not always possible. Opening these 'digital doors' has, in this way, had a ripple effect, unlocking positive outcomes beyond the initial learning."

– Hafsha, Smartlyte – Get Families Talking.

Walsall Resilient Communities

Walsall Resilient Communities is a programme that focuses on early intervention and prevention rather than treatment. It is made up of organisations including One Walsall and Walsall Community Networks, the social housing association Walsall Housing Group, Primary Care Networks, and Walsall Council. It focuses on *'early intervention and prevention rather than treatment, the purpose of the Resilient Communities workstream is to find ways to support people and our communities, to live independently and have active, healthy and thriving lives.'*[26]

What's needed: an inclusive communities approach to amplify the region's strengths

Current data reveals that community life in the WMCA area falls short when compared to national figures and other combined authorities. Despite the clear challenges, there are notable strengths that can offer valuable insights into what matters most to residents and how improvements to their quality of life can be achieved.

What is needed now is a way of bringing the region together around these priorities, to take the action required to start making these improvements.

Section 3: An inclusive communities approach to unite the region

This section explores how the inclusive communities approach can unite the region to improve residents' lives, explaining its purpose and use, and sharing examples of activity in the West Midlands that has inspired it.

To effect change in the social fabric of the region, there is a need to:

- recognise the unique power that civil society offers and how that can work alongside public agencies to build inclusion;

- unite and align the region around a common social ambition;

- better understand the social fabric of our communities, so the right kind of action can be taken, and progress can be measured;

- understand social outcomes from a community and resident-centred perspective in terms of how people think, what they feel, and what they do (eg do they vote, join clubs, help their neighbours) as they go about daily life;

- support people who live in the region to have the confidence, ability, and opportunity to share their views, and that they're systematically and consistently heard;

- support those holding formal power and influence to understand resident needs both quantitatively and qualitatively.

What is meant by 'inclusive communities'?

Ingredient 1: for everyone

The Mayor of the West Midlands has set out four priorities for the region: jobs for everyone, homes for everyone, growth for everyone, journeys for everyone. What's clear about these priorities is that they are for *everyone*. No-one should be left behind.

'For everyone' means that a resident's ability to contribute to and benefit from social and economic opportunities should not be dependent on their age, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, disability, or where they live. Special care should be given to ensuring that those who have traditionally been left behind do not continue to be forgotten.

It should be noted that the word 'everyone' doesn't resonate with all communities and residents. For example, through their experiences of not being able to access services 'for everyone', disabled people have historically felt unconsidered, despite being told they have been. To help mitigate this, it's important that the 'ingredients' are not used in isolation - i.e. in this case, how disabled people think, feel, and what they do (ingredient 3 – resident-centred outcomes) needs to also be prioritised. Deliberate action is required to address exclusion, and resources will need to be directed towards excluded groups.

Ingredient 2: community-centred outcomes

There are many things to consider and measure to help understand how a community changes over time, how it is different to another community, or what life might be like for someone living in that community. Perspectives to consider include asking how does the community…

- help people connect and build relationships with others?
- provide access to attractive, safe, welcoming spaces?
- celebrate differences?
- enable people to fulfil their potential no matter what their background or circumstances?

These perspectives are inspired by an understanding of communities from both a technical perspective (how academics and practitioners think), and a resident perspective (how someone living in the community might talk about what's important to them).

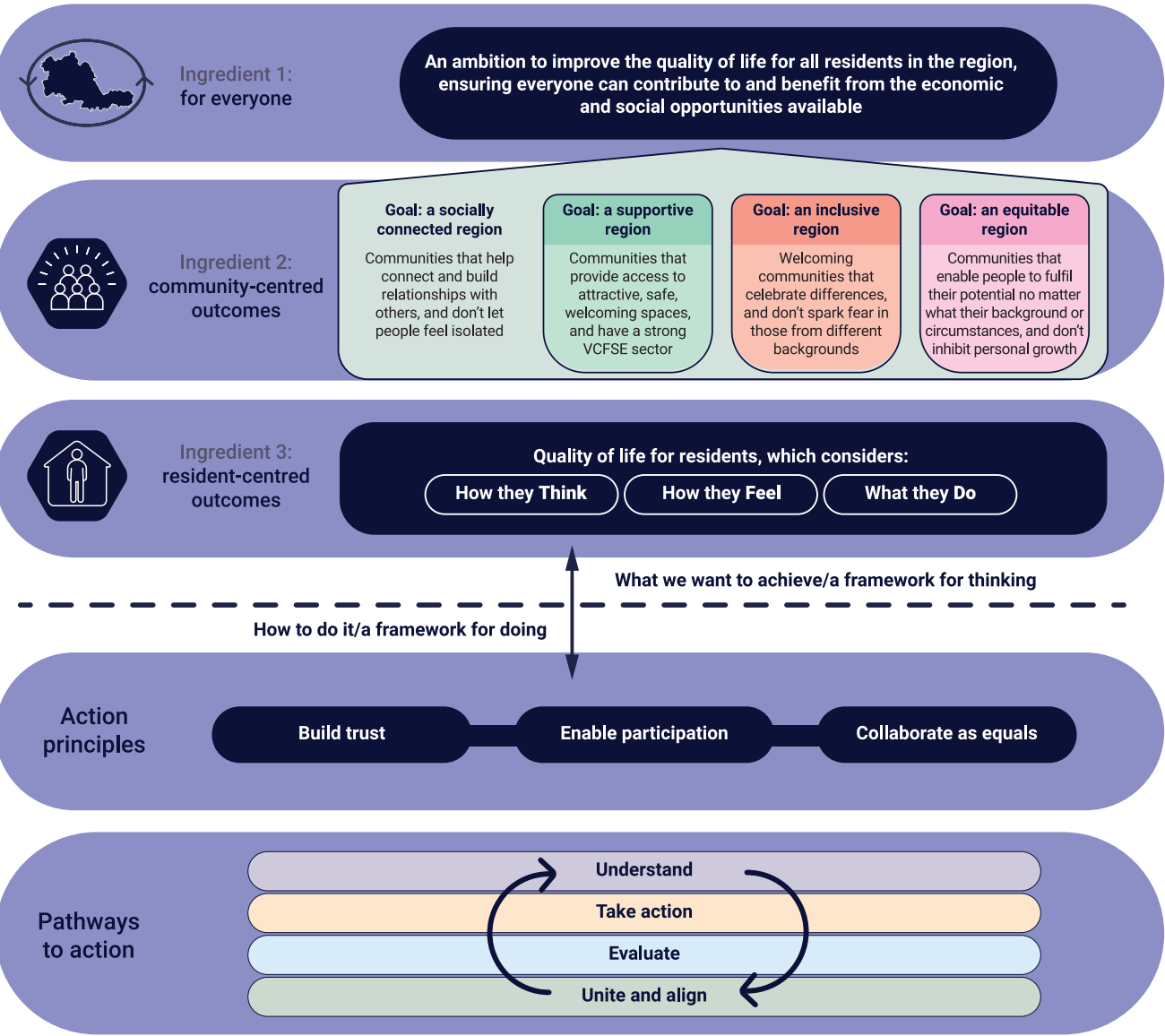## Ingredient 3: resident-centred outcomes

There is a need to consider the different things that influence the quality of a resident's life if we want it to improve. What a resident thinks, how they feel, and the things they do as they go about daily life, all have a big influence on their ability to contribute to, and benefit from, economic and social opportunities. Despite their importance, these things are often overlooked by others involved in making decisions that affect residents' daily experiences. Consideration at this individual and qualitative level is crucial. For example, it's not enough to ensure a certain *number* of public spaces exist without considering *if and how* these spaces affect a person's life:

- Do they think the spaces are suitable for what they want or need?
- Do the spaces help them feel safe and like they belong in their community?
- Can they use the spaces, and do they?

The inclusive communities approach for the West Midlands

At its core the inclusive communities approach aims to focus on strengthening the social systems of people living across the West Midlands. Focusing on social outcomes, from both a community and resident perspective (what they think, feel, and do), it seeks to drive investment and policy decisions that are better for communities and residents.

It is a framework for thinking and doing, seeking to unite the region around an ambition to improve quality of life for all residents, and acting as a useful tool to translate this shared vision into practical action.

Ingredient 1: for everyone
An ambition to improve the quality of life for all residents in the region, ensuring everyone can contribute to and benefit from the economic and social opportunities available

Ingredient 2: community-centred outcomes

Goal: a socially connected region
Communities that help connect and build relationships with others, and don't let people feel isolated

Goal: a supportive region
Communities that provide access to attractive, safe, welcoming spaces, and have a strong VCFSE sector

Goal: an inclusive region
Welcoming communities that celebrate differences, and don't spark fear in those from different backgrounds

Goal: an equitable region
Communities that enable people to fulfil their potential no matter what their background or circumstances, and don't inhibit personal growth

Ingredient 3: resident-centred outcomes
Quality of life for residents, which considers:
How they **Think** | How they **Feel** | What they **Do**

What we want to achieve/a framework for thinking

- -

How to do it/a framework for doing

Action principles
Build trust — Enable participation — Collaborate as equals

Pathways to action
Understand
Take action
Evaluate
Unite and align

What we want to achieve – a framework for thinking

Bringing together the three ingredients of 'inclusive communities', linking resident-centred outcomes to community-centred outcomes, and an ambition *for everyone*.

As explained in Section 2, each goal includes a 'key barometer for monitoring change', quantitatively taking 'the pulse of the region' and comparing with other regions. Supporting barometers can be used to add breadth and depth to this overall picture. These data sets provide a baseline, to be monitored over time.

Finally, the framework for thinking focuses on resident-centred outcomes, with each of the goals articulated from a resident-centred perspective i.e. how achieving the goal would impact a resident's quality of life. These outcomes encourage quantitative barometers to be supplemented with qualitative resident-centred data.

Surveys may be suitable in some cases to collect this data, but depending on the context other approaches may be more effective, such as ethnographic studies or focus groups.
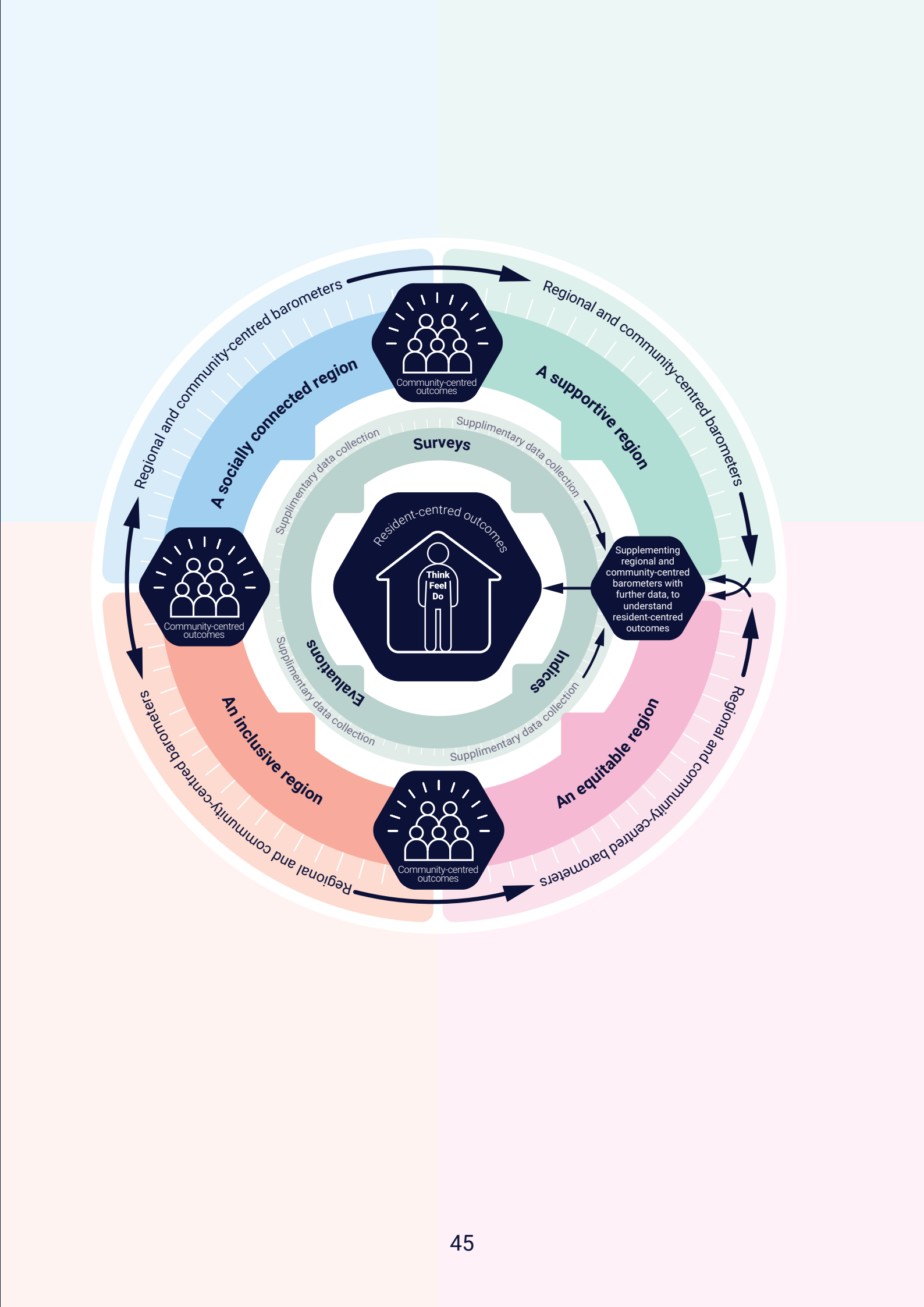
A socially connected region enables residents to:

Think
» Know what local support and opportunities are available
» Find out what you have in common with others

Feel
» Feel safer to meet new and different types of people
» Feel supported to learn and grow
» Feel heard and respected, and have confidence that individuals' needs are met by local institutions
» Feel united with local people and institutions

Do
» Feel able to contribute to common goals to create truly inclusive communities
» Take part in local activities and experiences
» Participate in two-way dialogue with local institutions
» Connect with people online and in-person
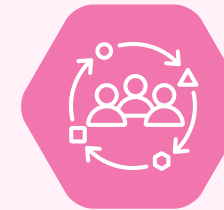
An inclusive region enables residents to:

Think » Know about diverse cultures and languages

Feel
» Feel a sense of belonging, rather than isolation
» Feel welcomed, accepted and included, regardless of background
» Feel safe, supported, and able to live without fear or worry
» Feel able to join social activities and commitments

Do
» Benefit from good-quality healthcare, schooling, welfare and other support meeting individual needs
» Engage with diverse people and celebrate differences
» Engage with intergenerational community activities, digitally or in-person
» Share and connect within the community

A supportive region enables residents to:

Think
» Know what local community spaces are available
» Know how to access community spaces in a safe, affordable and quick way

Feel
» Feel welcomed and accepted in community spaces
» Feel safe and supported in community spaces

Do
» Go to places where it is possible to engage with their community
» Go to places where it is possible to learn and grow, feel comfortable, and/or pursue an interest or activity
» Go to places to access support

An equitable region enables residents to:

Think
» Learn academic skills, skills for life and skills for work throughout each individual's life
» Learn via a diversity of routes that support individual needs
» Learn skills that support integration and inclusion in the local community, and society at large

Feel
» Comfortable, confident and accepted as an individual
» Welcomed by, and included in, the local community

Do
» Access transport, education, safety and support services that provide improved systemic conditions for social mobility
» Access local housing and labour market opportunities, regardless of background or circumstances
» Connect to people and places that can support and unlock collective opportunities

How to achieve it – a framework for doing

The second half of the approach provides detail around what to do to make progress towards the goals and ambition.

To provide overall direction that is useful for a range of audiences, key 'action principles' highlight the behaviours and ways of working needed in realising and sustaining inclusive communities. These principles aim to create alignment around behaviours and ways of working between partners (eg, between community organisations, or between a community organisation and the combined authority; stimulate thinking when considering what to do, and in planning the detail around more specific activities; and act as a starting point for reacting and adapting as things change in the future and as new situations emerge.

Enable participation

Encourage resident voices to be shared, heard and acted upon

It's important that inclusion is considered beyond the 'what' (improving quality of life) and 'who' (everyone in the region). Inclusion is an important part of 'how' we get there too. Rather than being told what their needs are, or having solutions 'done to them', residents should have opportunities to be part of the change that they want.

Why it's important:
- critical for understanding resident needs and priorities as they change
- enables shared ownership of decisions on infrastructure, policy and processes
- residents should have a right to influence decisions that affect their lives

Questions to consider:
- Could more opportunities for residents to share their needs, or help others understand their perspective, be created?
- How could those who are often 'forgotten', or whose perspectives aren't commonly considered or understood, be reached?
- Could different ways to contribute be created, for different residents and communities?

Collaborate as equals

Work with others in ways where power is shared, and unique strengths are celebrated

Recognition that collaboration is a powerful way of working isn't new. It's commonly accepted that diverse perspectives create better solutions, that risk and reward can be shared, and that collaboration leads to more effective use of skills and capabilities, for example – but still, true collaboration often doesn't happen or doesn't happen well. As well as the practical (processes, space and time) and attitudinal (fear, risk) barriers to effective collaboration, unequal power dynamics need to be addressed directly.

Why it's important:
- A resident's life is influenced by the actions of many within a complex system
- Collaboration makes the best use of the region's strengths, and avoids duplication and competition, amplifying the outcomes for residents
- Entrenched power dynamics exist, so need to be recognised and addressed

Questions to consider:
- Could new opportunities to collaborate be identified, beyond those who are closest (geographically, or through existing processes and relationships)?
- What opportunities or challenges could only be tackled through collaboration?
- How could some of the barriers to working with others, such as perceived risk or existing processes, be addressed?

Build trust

Seek to understand the perspectives of others, and develop long-term relationships with them

Strong and healthy long-term relationships with others (social capital) are fundamental to the quality of people's daily lives (how they feel, think, and what they do). Such relationships require trust. Beyond the streets and neighbourhoods where people live, they are crucial for people and organisations to work together, and important to the functioning of the wider systems that influence social outcomes.

Why it's important:
- Trust is an important factor running through many different social outcomes
- The work required to achieve positive and lasting social outcomes takes time, long-term relationships, and collaboration
- Trust is crucial to engaging with communities, delivering initiatives, and responding quickly as things change

Questions to consider:
- Which relationships need to be strengthened, and which started?
- How would a foundation of understanding and alignment be created, for those wanting to build long-term relationships?
- Could commonality, or the things that people share, be used to establish and build trust?
- How could connecting socially ('as a person' beyond their 'role') help to build trust?

## Using the approach in different ways: an iterative cycle

The inclusive communities' approach is a framework for thinking and doing, and by bringing a renewed focus on social outcomes it can be used to:

- **Understand** what's happening and what's important in the lives of residents and their communities, and the implications on wider regional priorities
- **Take action** and do things differently, to better support communities and residents
- **Evaluate** change and measure progress, from a community and resident-centred perspective

These uses form an iterative cycle, because:
- achieving social outcomes takes time
- the systems influencing communities and the daily lives of residents are complex and interdependent
- communities change over time, and so too do their priorities, so ongoing testing and learning is needed

Bringing others on the journey and sharing the latest insight from these iterative cycles is important because the approach needs to unite and align the region. This is the fourth way in which the approach can be used.
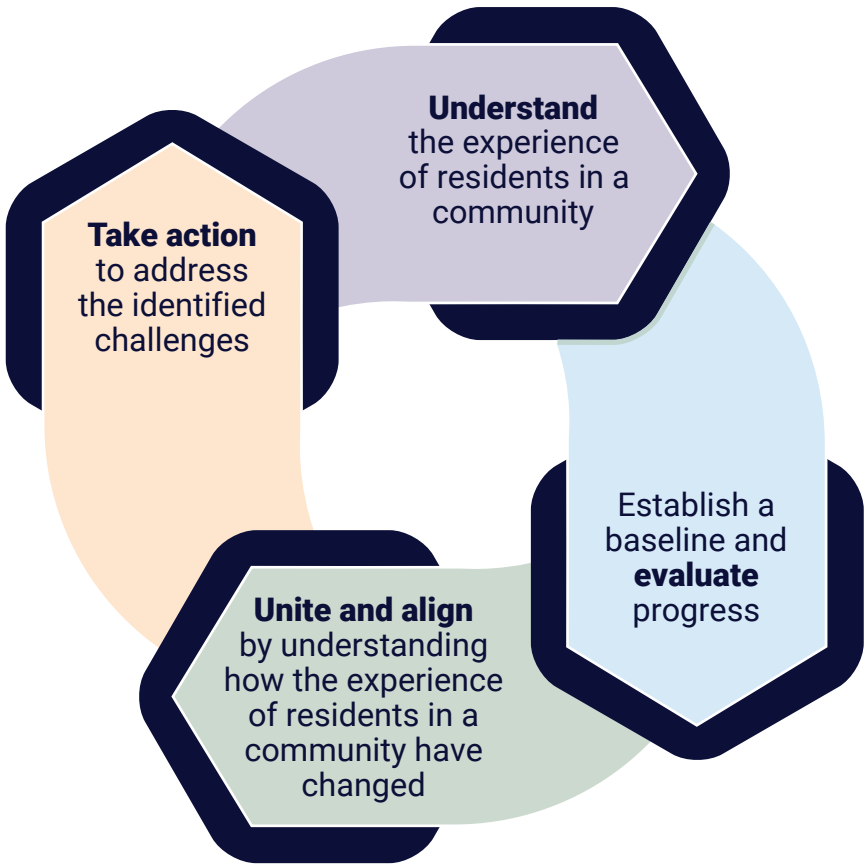
> 66
>
> I would like us to be a brave region that isn't afraid to try new things and to learn"

Participating community organisation

Understand the experience of residents in a community

Take action to address the identified challenges

Establish a baseline and **evaluate** progress

Unite and align by understanding how the experience of residents in a community have changed

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Each pathway recommends specific activities to focus on, and prompt questions to consider, to critically engage and support an approach to building inclusive communities.

1. Understand what's happening in the lives of residents and their communities, and what's important for the region, through a focus on social outcomes.

What activities could you plan and deliver to…?

Analyse the state and dynamics of communities – know what, where and who the different communities are, and their priorities
- » What are the levers that lead to the most important local outcomes?
- » What are the relationships and interactions within and between communities?
- » How do strengths, challenges, and needs vary by geography, demographics and other dimensions?

Help communities tell their stories – know what the resident and community needs and priorities are, and ensure they're effectively communicated to others
- » How can we create safe, inclusive spaces for residents to share their experiences and aspirations?
- » What methods (eg, digital platforms, public forums, participatory research, community listening) can best capture and amplify community voices?
- » How can we ensure that community narratives influence policy and funding decisions?

Shift culture and mindsets – how people think about what's important, and the role of inclusive communities within the region
- » How can we embed the value of inclusive communities across all sectors, from business to local government, the health service and the police force?
- » What strategies can help challenge biases or misconceptions about certain communities?
- » How do we measure changes in attitudes and mindsets over time?

2. Take action that leads to better social outcomes for communities and residents.

What activities could you plan and deliver to…?

Create opportunities for residents to participate – mechanisms to better understand their needs, facilitate change in communities, and empower residents
- » How can we create more accessible and meaningful opportunities for residents to engage in decision-making?
- » What structures are needed to ensure that community participation is ongoing, not just one-off consultations?
- » How do we support grassroots leadership and community-led initiatives?

Review how resource is allocated - how decisions are made, and where resource is directed and used
- » How transparent and inclusive are the decision-making processes around resource allocation?
- » How can we streamline bureaucracy to make it easier for community organisations to access funding and support?
- » What mechanisms can be introduced to ensure communities have a say in funding decisions?

Adapt key delivery processes – the ways in which new initiatives, projects and services are implemented within communities
- » How can we design interventions that are responsive to evolving community needs?
- » How do we ensure accountability while allowing for more agile and responsive interventions?
- » How can we encourage the adoption and use of related and complementary tools eg, The Health Equity Assessment Tool[27]?
- » How do we ensure that interventions are sustainable beyond initial funding cycles?

3. **Evaluate** impact and measure progress from a resident and community-centred perspective.

What activities could you plan and deliver to…?

Gather qualitative and quantitative data – ensure a blend of data is available to build a complete picture of social outcomes
- » How do we ensure that lived experiences are given equal weight to statistical data in decision-making?
- » What new or existing data sources can help measure the strength of inclusive communities?
- » How can we make community-level data more accessible and useful for local decision-makers?

Strive for better data over time – baseline and monitor changes, and improve the quality, granularity and scope of data available
- » What mechanisms can ensure continuous data improvement without adding administrative burden?
- » How do we ensure data collection is inclusive and representative of all communities?
- » What partnerships can help fill gaps in existing social data?

Gather evidence to support the case for inclusive communities – evidence for re-enforcing the importance of social outcomes at an individual, community, and wider regional level
- » How can we link inclusive community efforts to broader economic, social and environmental outcomes?
- » What case studies or success stories best illustrate the impact of inclusive community initiatives?
- » How can we use evidence to influence policy and funding priorities at a regional and national level?

4. **Unite and align** with others who are working towards the same social outcomes.

What activities could you plan and deliver to…?

Share strengths and learning with others – sharing what works, best practices, and highlighting the great work being done by individuals and organisations
- » How can we create open channels for sharing knowledge across sectors and communities?
- » What formats (eg, networks, digital hubs, conferences) would best facilitate knowledge exchange?
- » How do we ensure that learning is actioned, not just documented?

Identify opportunities to collaborate – building relationships with new collaborators to tackle shared challenges, and finding ways of maximising impact with existing collaborators
- » What existing partnerships can be strengthened to improve impact?
- » How do we incentivise cross-sector collaboration on social inclusion?
- » What common goals can bring different organisations together?

Bring people together – creating new connections within and across the boundaries that define existing groups and communities
- » How can we create spaces where diverse groups can connect and build trust?
- » What initiatives can foster inter-community collaboration and solidarity?
- » How can we highlight shared challenges and aspirations to promote a sense of common purpose?

Who it's for and how to use it

The approach is for everyone: the combined authority, local authorities, VCFSE organisations, businesses, funding organisations, and by no means least: communities and individual residents across the West Midlands.

Some will better understand the dynamics of their communities by thinking about them from a new perspective, some will increase their impact by changing how they work and who they work with, and others will change how they think about measuring and communicating impact.

It's a collective ambition and responsibility, but everyone involved in the social fabric of the West Midlands will make their own unique contribution based on their capabilities, strengths and role:

- Combined authority – convening, facilitating, sharing best practice and building capacity and capability across the region, as well as commissioning and making investment decisions
- Local authorities – commissioning and delivering services, identifying opportunities to collaborate, and engaging directly with residents through existing relationships and initiative
- VCFSE organisations – commissioning and delivering services, identifying opportunities to collaborate, and engaging directly with residents through their services
- Funding and private sector organisations – identifying opportunities for having the biggest impact through a new perspective on the needs and priorities of residents

How it's valuable and useful will be different for different people, so it should be used flexibly.

Adaptable language – the language of this report and framework aims to be relevant to a wide range of audiences, but should be adapted where needed eg, a VCFSE organisation may replace 'resident' with 'people who live here' if that's the language they use locally.

Adaptable actions – it's a framework for thinking and doing, not a fixed set of instructions. The same underlying pathway to action will inspire individuals and organisations to carry out activities that might look quite different in practice eg, when considering ways to unite and align, by identifying opportunities to collaborate, community organisations may create new spaces to connect and collaborate, whereas the WMCA may identify specific collaboration opportunities across programmes.

How the inclusive communities approach fits in with other work

It's important that the approach is generative and additive: contributing to, integrating with, and complementing other established strategies, work and initiatives. It should act as a useful tool that makes it easier for people in the combined authority and beyond to do their work, carry out activities, and contribute towards the shared ambition.

With this I mind, it's useful to acknowledge some of the actual, potential, and perceived overlaps and links that exist. Further mapping and development work will be needed to understand these in more detail, and this work is referenced within this report's recommendations (page 53).

A brief overview of some of the most relevant areas to consider:

Related language and corresponding strategies or tools: other terms are used to communicate some of the same and related underlying ideas that exist within inclusive communities eg, 'civic strength', 'prosperity'. These sometimes relate to existing strategies, tools and work eg, Walsall's focus on 'Resilient Communities'. Rather than replacing these words and work, the inclusive communities approach provides ways of thinking about how these connected areas fit into the context of the wider region eg, by understanding how 'Resilient Communities' relates to the inclusive communities approach's goal for a socially connected region, can opportunities for collaboration be identified with other LA's work?

The Inclusive Growth Framework: focuses all types of investment in a way that prioritises the needs of people and places with the needs of the environment. The inclusive communities approach adds an additional level of detail and value to understanding the needs of people and places through its focus on resident-centred social outcomes - how they feel, think, and what they do.

The Office for Public Service Innovation (OPSI): Since January 2025, the West Midlands has been developing a public service reform agenda' that drives innovation and inclusion in ways that improves the quality life of residents and reduce the cost of public services. Areas currently being explored include early years, temporary accommodation and asylum placements, health and social care, and employment. OPSI will aim to work across the region to incubate new ideas and ways of working, and scale tried and tested innovations. A fundamental principle of achieving its aims and potential will be enabling more inclusive ways of working with communities and residents.

Examples that inspired the principles

Enable participation:

Collaborative participation in Dudley

CoLab Dudley is a small organisation with only 1.6 full-time equivalent staff, yet it has a major impact on their community, with a long-term physical presence on Dudley High Street coupled with an ongoing programme of engagement and action. Each year they work with a new group of 15 to 20 'Time Rebels' - local creatives who deliver their own projects under a shared 'collective enquiry', often in partnership with local groups. These projects can range from a 'walk and draw' discovery of the local area, to partnering with a local group who care for green spaces.

Experiences and insights are shared both amongst Time Rebels themselves and with the wider local community. Through the deliberate creation of space and time for collaborative problem solving, reflection and learning, their work addresses day-to-day challenges while also thinking and challenging systemically, and elevating the voices of residents.

Creating conditions for participation in Birmingham

Witton Lodge Community Association was founded in 1994 by residents responding to the regeneration of Perry Common. The association has since built, and now manages over 200 rental properties, hosts popular community events, and delivers support and services for local people across multiple venues.

Community engagement, tenant relationships, and an open culture are core aspects of their work, demonstrating how building social capital ensures people feel supported and part of a network. They make their community aware of available support and how to access it.

The WLCA has built trust through long-term partnerships, listening to communities, and being visible in their work, showing that trust isn't automatic but must be nurtured through transparency, consistency, and engagement.

> "Having physical hubs in the heart of the community is vital. This hasn't happened by accident but intentionally. We're all very approachable. We encourage people to tell us anything. It's a culture of openness. There is a relationship with tenants that goes beyond a purely contractual one. Our tenants are able to access our other services. Many of our employees and volunteers are tenants or have used our services, creating deeper relationships"

Iram Fardus, Witton Lodge Community Association

Examples that inspired the principles

Collaborate as equals:

Community-led collaboration in Coventry

After experiencing bereavement, a Coventry woman found solace in visiting a woodland, but it was a long drive from home. Wanting to create a similar space locally, she began a campaign to develop a community woodland. Over time, a team of 25 people joined her, working to shape a space that meets the needs of their diverse community.

They are now making the case for their bottom-up approach, which would provide free workshops and other support for local residents. While individual council officers have been supportive, navigating existing processes has been complex, as traditional systems aren't always designed for this kind of non-profit, community-led initiative. The campaign has benefitted from the support of the charity Grapevine, with a community organiser able to provide long-term expertise and resource.

Collaborating across divides in Sandwell

Gambian Islamic Community Centre's mission is to create and maximise opportunities for the wider community of Sandwell by providing locally accessible cultural orientation, educational development, and skills training for children and adults. There is a focus on recent migrants from West Africa whose first language is not English, but GICC serves all members of the Muslim faith, helping to address attitudinal barriers to collaboration between different demographics.

GICC address long-term unequal power dynamics, and unlock opportunities that might otherwise be difficult for their community to access. The GICC is a partner of the IMAN Network, allowing it to connect more widely and engage in strategic collaborative work, including initiatives to challenge islamophobia, whilst also maintaining a focused local presence within the community it represents. The following case study has more information on the IMAN network.

Examples that inspired the principles

Build trust:

Building trust through collaboration across the West Midlands

The Inclusive Muslim Action Network (IMAN) is a grassroots, community-based faith network established to address the needs of marginalised and underserved Muslim communities in the West Midlands whose membership includes mosques, faith leaders, community organisations, councillors, the Mayor of Sandwell and local authority officers.

IMAN fosters cohesion, empowers communities, and bridges gaps between marginalised groups and public services. It is an example of how grassroots organisations can drive meaningful change through collaboration, innovation, and community leadership. By being responsive and adaptive, IMAN is able to respond swiftly to emerging challenges, such as far-right extremism, global crises, and Islamophobia. IMAN facilitates dialogue and collaboration, ensuring that Muslim communities are represented in decision-making processes at local and regional levels, and also works with non-Muslim communities to change perceptions and challenge prejudices.

Building trust to tackle social isolation in Solihull

Gateway Family Services CIC is a community-driven organisation in Solihull dedicated to improving health and wellbeing by connecting people with the support they need.

By offering, as standard, 12 sessions followed by an empowerment course as a follow-up, they build up trust over time, allowing even participants who are initially low in confidence to benefit from learning new skills and reduce their own social isolation. Gateway Family Services aims to be responsive, flexible, and fluid, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach, and ensuring the people they work with feel understood and can form a strong relationship with others.

"

Our commissioners are flexible, and their requirements change – we have to respond accordingly. This flexibility has allowed us to retain our tender for seven years. As a result, we have been able to tailor our approach. We compete with external organisations for our funding because as long as you can provide a service, you can get the tender, but external providers lack local knowledge. People in the community have in-depth knowledge of the place they work in, and that is worth millions."

Cathy, Gateway Family Services CIC

Section 4: Recommendations for implementing the approach

This section outlines the actions to start taking now to achieve the long-term ambitions of the approach. It is relevant for everyone who cares about the quality of life of people and communities across the West Midlands.

Recommendations for taking the next practical steps

The pathways to action prompt questions (see page 48) encourage consideration of, and critical engagement with, the overall challenge of what to do to support inclusive communities. These pathways will always be relevant as things change.

The following recommendations aim to address what, specifically, needs to be actioned and planned now. They have been created using the inclusive communities' approach as a tool for thinking and doing, alongside the contextual insight gathered during its development.

Recommendation 1: Make resident-centred decisions the norm

Real change happens when people can see how this approach connects with their work and feel empowered to use it in shaping decisions that impact communities.

Who's this for? Anyone making decisions that affect residents in the West Midlands, including local authorities, funders, businesses, and VCFSE organisations.

First step: Start the conversation in your organisation.
- What are you already doing that aligns with this approach?
- What's harder to change, and why?
- How does this fit with existing policies and plans?
- What small steps can you take now to prioritise resident-centred outcomes?

The goal: A region where every organisation puts inclusive communities at the heart of their work, by building trust, enabling participation, and collaborating as equals to improve lives.

Recommendation 2: Direct funding to support positive outcomes for communities, not just projects

For communities to thrive, funding needs to be flexible, long-term, and designed to realise positive social and economic outcomes – not just short-term targets.

Who's this for? Funders, policymakers, investors, and organisations that want long-term impact.

First step: Shift how funders think and operate.
- Open conversations between funders and fundees about the bigger picture, the desired social outcomes and how long-term investment could support this.
- Champion multi-year funding that provides stability, yet allows organisations to adapt to meet changing community needs.
- Build in succession planning and 'bridging funding' to sustain impact beyond project timelines.
- Show the importance of funding the 'time' needed by communities to participate.

The goal: Stronger, long-term relationships between funders and communities that lead to a more diverse and sustainable funding landscape, benefitting the region.

Recommendation 3: Adjust procurement so it works for communities

Procurement should be an enabler, not a barrier, for smaller local organisations and the VCFSE sector, which have the knowledge and experience to support communities effectively.

Who's this for? The combined authority, local authorities, businesses and any organisation with a procurement budget.

First step: Make procurement fairer and more accessible.
- Share lessons from 'test and learn' or 'pilot' contracts. What worked, what didn't, and what needs to change?
- Remove unnecessary barriers for smaller organisations. Ensure longer bid windows, simpler paperwork, and flexible contract requirements.
- Ensure social value commitments in contracts are clear, meaningful and responsive to local priorities.

The goal: A procurement system that delivers better community outcomes by removing obstacles that prevent the right organisations from delivering impactful work.

Recommendation 4: Create a culture of collaboration, learning, and innovation

No single organisation can solve these challenges alone. Real change happens when people and organisations share knowledge, resources, and ideas.

Who's this for? Public and private sector leaders, funders, community groups, and organisations working across sectors.

First step: Break down silos by collaborating across sectors meaningfully and intentionally by building on principles of equality, trust and participation.

- Identify opportunities for public-private partnerships that put communities at the centre.
- Support local authorities to share best practices, pool resources and coordinate efforts.
- Set up practical tools including shared directories, group spaces, and messaging boards to keep people connected.

The goal: A culture where collaboration is the norm; where knowledge, funding, and ideas flow freely, helping organisations learn from each other and build on what works.

Recommendation 5: Build stronger local leadership

Build stronger local community leadership.

Who's this for? Community leaders, voluntary organisations, and residents who want a say in shaping their communities.

First step: Invest in people.

- Provide training, networks, and peer mentoring for local community leaders.
- Make it easy for residents to share their experiences and shape decisions in their own words, on their own terms.
- Recognise and support grassroots leadership, ensuring that lived experience informs decision-making.

The goal: A thriving VCFSE sector where leadership is developed, voices are heard, and communities are in the driving seat of change.

The future of the inclusive communities approach

This approach was developed between June 2024 and March 2025, by gathering the thoughts and views of many, and by considering the situation in the West Midlands at this time.

Since the work began, many factors have shifted and the political and strategic landscape will undoubtedly continue to evolve in the years ahead. As social systems are always evolving, it's vital to focus on what remains constant - particularly by strengthening bonds, relationships, and partnerships across the system, emphasising the importance of the 'building trust' principle.

Given the ongoing changes, it's also essential to continuously update, build upon, and refine the inclusive communities approach by incorporating the latest insights. This adaptive process of testing, doing, and sharing, ensures responsiveness and relevance in an ever- evolving context. The economic case for inclusive communities has been made, but ongoing measurement, evaluation and evidence will be essential to sustain and strengthen it.

By embedding collaboration, building trust, prioritising residents experiences, and making long-term investments in social outcomes, we can create a future where inclusive communities are not just an aspiration but a reality that shapes everyday life in the West Midlands.

The development of the inclusive communities approach would not have been possible without the contributions of many. We'd like to thank and acknowledge the hard work of everyone who participated from VCFSE organisations, local authorities, the WMCA, peer researchers, and The Young Foundation.

Appendix

Section 1: Source data for key barometers and supporting barometers

The below table provides the data sources for each of the key and supporting barometers used in the report. Links are provided to enable updated data to be collected over time.

Goal 1: a socially connected region		
Key barometer for monitoring change	Extent of agreement that people in the neighbourhood can be trusted	Community Life Survey, DCMS
Supporting barometers for monitoring change:	Frequency of chatting to neighbours more than once a month	Community Life Survey, DCMS
	Extent of agreement that if you needed help there would be people there for you	Community Life Survey, DCMS
	Extent of agreement that if you wanted company there would be people to call on	Community Life Survey, DCMS
Goal 2: a supportive region		
Key barometer for monitoring change	Attractiveness of local area	Community Life Survey, DCMS
Supporting barometers for monitoring change:	Adult engagement with the arts in the last 12 months (physical)	Participation Survey, DCMS
	Adult engagement with libraries in the last 12 months (physical)	Participation Survey, DCMS
	Satisfaction with green and natural spaces in local area	Community Life Survey, DCMS
Goal 3: an inclusive region		
Key barometer for monitoring change	Strength of feelings of belonging to immediate neighbourhood	Community Life Survey, DCMS
Supporting barometers for monitoring change:	Extent of agreement that a local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together	Community Life Survey, DCMS
	Extent of agreement that people in the neighbourhood pull together to improve the neighbourhood	Community Life Survey, DCMS
	Engagement in civic participation, activism or consultation activities in the last 12 months	Community Life Survey, DCMS
Goal 4: an equitable region		
Key barometer for monitoring change	Promising prospects index	Social Mobility Commission
Supporting barometers for monitoring change:	Conditions of childhood index	Social Mobility Commission
	Labour market opportunities for young people index	Social Mobility Commission
	Innovation and growth index	Social Mobility Commission

Section 2: Understanding community life beyond the current 'snapshot'

This section provides further detail around how to best understand the state of communities in the West Midlands, now and in the future. This builds on the snapshot of the current state, to set out a resident-centred approach to evaluate changes in communities over time, and evidence the impact of the approach.

For each of the goals outlined in the approach, we share:

1. What we have learned about how West Midlands communities understand the concepts underpinning these goals. This informs the resident-centered outcomes for these goals.
2. Suggested approaches to enhance future evidence, using resident-centred outcomes as an initial framework to evaluate and evidence changes towards these goals.
3. A review of existing secondary data indicators – with a rationale for how key and supporting barometers for monitoring change were selected.

This approach to evidencing and evaluating the approach has emerged through desk-based research and exploration of the available data and WMCA's data needs, alongside qualitative peer research with residents and engagement with representatives from local VCFSE organisations. This process highlighted several considerations that shape the approach:

Bridging different evidence paradigms

The WMCA's state of the region reports rely on quantitative data and statistics to evidence progress against macro-level inclusive growth objectives around being resident- and community-centred. By contrast, the approach necessitates a different approach to evidence, which can more effectively capture the complexities of residents' lived experiences at micro-levels within communities. These ways of working with communities can embody factors that do not align with the evidence metrics typically used in government reporting.[28] Our suggested approach attempts to bridge these paradigms, bringing together statistics and stories in ways that reflect how residents and local VCFSE representatives interpret policy terms and concepts. This is anchored in what an Inclusive Communities Approach enables residents to think, feel and do.

Innovation to enhance future evidence

The current data does not provide a full picture. There are limitations in the geographic coverage, granularity and demographic breakdown of available data sets; and things residents and local VCFSE organisations told us were important – such as safety, accessibility and the nature of local relationships – are not effectively captured in existing survey data for the region. Our peer research with residents and engagements with local VCFSE representatives both also highlighted the difficulties of developing qualitative insight on social concepts. This was because shrinking and

precarious VCFSE funding and foundational issues of day-to-day realities in their region were at the fore of people's minds – acting as a barrier to envisioning alternative realities.

Therefore, this section develops ideas and pathways to innovate and enhance the data picture in the future. This covers:

- Potential household survey questions and themes (with a current WMCA household survey being piloted).
- Approaches to reporting and evaluation – eg, for local authority activities and/or grants and contracts to VCFSE organisations intended to enable inclusive communities.
- Research themes and questions to guide qualitative and participatory research with residents.

Guided by community-led understandings of resident-centred outcomes, innovation of this type could enable the development of data as a civic infrastructure[29] that enhances capabilities for community participation. This approach should aim to ensure that the perceived need to collect more data does not lead to communities feeling surveyed, over-researched or over-consulted – which may further exclude those who are mistrustful of government bodies based on their own previous experiences. The ideas presented for evidencing the approach must also be considered pragmatically and be invested in effectively if they are pursued – recognising the burden placed on the WMCA data and insights team to gather, synthesise and analyse it on a regular basis. The range of suggestions is also intended to reflect the diverse audiences of this document – recognising that different actors will focus on different outcomes and monitor change in different ways.

Goal: A socially connected region

This goal is underpinned by the concept of **social capital**.

Through the peer research, we found that residents understood social capital in a range of ways, including:

- Feeling safe to connect with those who you live and work with.
- Developing a supportive network where people can engage and learn from one another.
- Stepping beyond your comfort zone to engage with new and different types of local people.
- Knowing the right people and community groups that enable integration into local places.
- Establishing a community both online and in-person.
- Being part of a network with shared values who work together to achieve a common goal.
- Strong relationships and unity between citizens.
- Having access to adequate opportunities.
- Experiences with different cultures to foster social connections.
- Access to place that bring people together and enhance connections with people.

Yet, at its heart, the crux of what residents found to be important rested not on what initiatives supported social capital, but how these initiatives were delivered – with a set of common ideas emerging across the social concepts covering: support, access, safety (physical and emotional), diversity, relationships (with each other and with local authorities) and conversation.

Building on this the local VCFSE representatives felt that community organisations are well-

placed to deliver on these ideas, as they could build on the trust they've already established to further enhance social capital. There was felt to be a need for this distinctive quality of VCFSE organisations to be better recognised and valued within the approach.

This is further emphasised through the ways both residents and VCFSE organisations discussed the relationships between residents and institutions holding power and authority – referred to as 'linking social capital' in academic literature. A paradox emerged in discussions in action learning sessions: with recognition of the risks of overreliance on institutions, balanced with a feeling that relationships between communities and local authorities are important.

For all parties, trust is key to unlock these relationships and takes time to build. Residents emphasised the importance of continuous, rather than one-off, engagements. They explained that building truly inclusive communities requires a long-term commitment, where they are not merely invited to participate as a one-off but are actively involved in ongoing conversations and decision-making processes. The establishment of dedicated spaces, whether physical or digital, for residents to connect with local authority representatives was viewed as essential. They want a model of engagement that is transparent, accessible, and responsive to their needs and concerns. Residents also desire...

Genuine dialogue: They want spaces that foster open, two-way communication where their voices are not only heard but acted upon.

Ownership and agency: Residents seek a sense of ownership in the processes and projects that affect their lives, feeling empowered to shape outcomes rather than merely providing input.

Regular updates and feedback loops: They value consistent updates on progress and outcomes, along with opportunities to give feedback that can meaningfully impact decisions.

Capacity-building and resources: For deeper involvement, they request support and resources that enable them to participate effectively, especially for those facing barriers such as language, mobility, or lack of technical knowledge.

Likewise, for local VCFSE organisations, increasing opportunities for collaboration between organisations and institutions could be beneficial, but links must be two-way with the ability to push back. Rather than simply increasing links with institutions, which may not necessarily have a positive impact on community organisations; mutually beneficial relationships are desired that allow communities to hold government and funders to account too.

Overall, the model of engagement should be dynamic and reciprocal, where community participation is not episodic but an integral part of how change happens across the region. This approach is seen as critical for building lasting, authentic inclusivity within the West Midlands area and ensuring that all residents feel heard and supported in shaping the future of their communities.

VCFSE organisations felt that there is a need to establish shared values to enable this approach: between residents, community organisations, local authorities and funders. Shared values are not always set out, and therefore the approach could offer a way to do this.

An approach to evidencing outcomes of social capital for residents

Across these ideas, an emergent set of outcomes describes what communities in the West Midlands feel that enhancing social capital should enable residents to think, feel and do:

Being part of communities that help people connect and build relationships with others, and don't let people feel alone and isolated, enables residents to…	
Think	• Know what local support and opportunities are available • Find out what you have in common with others
Feel	• Feel safer to meet new and different types of people • Feel supported to learn • Feel heard, respected and that my needs are met by local institutions • Feel united with local people and institutions
Do	• Contribute to common goals • Take part in local activities and experiences • Participate in two-way dialogue with local institutions • Connect with people online and in-person

This outcomes framework helps us to identify approaches to developing different types of evidence of the role of social capital in the approach. In relation to VCFSE organisations, it is intended that these indicators will better capture the distinctive value they can bring.

Example approaches to evidencing resident-centred outcomes of social capital	
Think	• Household survey questions asking about awareness of local support and opportunities • Reporting from/ evaluation of VCFSE organisation funding that captures the reach of the support and opportunities they provide locally, ideally with a focus on marginalised demographic groups • Participatory and qualitive research with residents to explore what communities identify that they have in common (or not) with local peers
Feel	• Household survey questions asking about perceptions of safety, support, unity and relationships with local institutions • Qualitative reporting from/evaluation of VCFSE organisation funding that captures how their activities make residents feel when meeting local people and/or learning • Participatory and qualitative research with residents that explores feelings of safety, support, unity and relationships with local institutions

Example approaches to evidencing resident-centred outcomes of social capital	
Do	• Participation data for local activities and institutional dialogues, ideally broken down by demographic characteristics • Qualitative evaluation of local authority activities to assess the dynamism and reciprocity of their dialogues with residents, and to capture how this enables residents to contribute to common goals • Qualitative reporting from/evaluation of VCFSE organisation funding that captures how their activities enable residents to contribute to common goals • Participatory and qualitative research with residents to explore the nature and extent of their connections with people online and in-person

This can accompany existing secondary data sources on social capital:

Data set	Indicators	Notes
Community Life Survey 2023/24 (DCMS)	• Extent of agreement that people in the neighbourhood can be trusted • Frequency of chatting to neighbours more than once a month • Extent of agreement that your local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together • Extent of agreement that if you needed help there would be people there for you • Extent of agreement that if you wanted company there would be people to call on • Number of people who you can really count on to listen to you when you need to talk, by local authority • Extent of agreement that people in the neighbourhood pull together to improve the neighbourhood, by local authority • Extent of agreement that you can personally influence decisions affecting the local area, by local authority • Whether people would like to be more involved in local decisions	Only adults aged over 16. 2023/24 data representative at LA-level. This can be used to calculate CA figures. Prior data sets were only representative to ITL_1 region level. Demographic breakdowns only available at national level.
Local authority surveys	• Safety • Satisfaction with council • Engagements with council • Accessing advice, support and information	Inconsistent approach across LAs in the region – not easily compared. Sandwell annual; Solihull and Coventry every two years.

Among these, the following indicators have been selected as key and supporting barometers for monitoring change:

- Extent of agreement that people in the neighbourhood can be trusted (Community Life Survey, DCMS)
- Frequency of chatting to neighbours more than once a month (Community Life Survey, DCMS)
- Extent of agreement that if you needed help there would be people there for you (Community Life Survey, DCMS)
- Extent of agreement that if you wanted company there would be people to call on (Community Life Survey, DCMS)

Trust is the primary indicator as this is the most typically used indicator of social capital in academic and practitioner literature, and can capture several different understandings of social capital (both academic and community-oriented). The supplementary indicators were chosen to reflect some of the different resident-centred outcomes, such as connecting with people and accessing support. All of these are included in DCMS's Community Life Survey, therefore we can reasonably expect a regular time series, with the ability to compare among LAs within the region, and against other CA regions.

Goal: a supportive region

This goal is underpinned by the concept of **social infrastructure**.

Through the peer research, we found that residents understood social infrastructure in a range of ways, including:

- Places to bring communities together to engage with and learn from one another.
- Places that accept and do not discriminate against people in the community.
- Places dedicated to a specific interest/activity (eg, universities, religious buildings, etc).
- Places that involve social and religious expression.
- Places to learn skills outside formal education, where there is a possibility to explore more affordable further education options for people.
- Places to receive support.
- Places that support people to improve their own livelihoods.
- The physical ability to travel and reach destinations in a safe, affordable and quick way.
- Mechanisms to build more awareness of physical community locations and activities – including via digital platforms.

It is clear that it is not simply the presence of social infrastructure that is important to residents, but the ability for communities to access and engage with these, and also what doing so enables for them. This was echoed by the VCFSE representatives, learning from the action learning sessions how social infrastructure can foster inclusivity and address multiple other challenges, bridging gaps.

These VCFSE organisations recognised themselves as examples of social infrastructure, leading to reflection on what it means to maintain these.

Social Infrastructure is an ongoing process of creating and maintaining networks, spaces and communities over the long term. The term infrastructuring was highlighted by a participant from CoLab Dudley, where it is used to emphasise that social infrastructure goes beyond merely a static set of bricks and mortar – it is also a verb. People are social infrastructure – and need to be maintained and replenished, and to grow, learn and evolve.

However, social infrastructure can be so focused on maintaining itself that it has little time to reach out and listen to others in the community. The tension is that social infrastructure which does 'reach out' and aim for diverse user groups may end up overloaded as needs outweigh capacity –partially creating a disincentive to reach out.

There is also a challenge in communicating how social infrastructure fits into wider power structures and how communities can be involved in shaping the context, empowering people.

There is a need to identify the limits of specific social infrastructure, and understand why. Improving resources for outreach and signposting could allow social infrastructure to thrive and reach the right people, but must build on community organisations' own knowledge of their communities, linking back to what is measured, and how. Challenges can arise when signposting people to traditional/institutional social infrastructure that operates differently.

The importance of diverse users of social infrastructure must be recognised and resourced. The passion and motivations of community organisations and their staff are a unique selling point, which must be valued - not exploited.

The approach, therefore, should recognise and measure the impact of social infrastructure as a glue or vehicle for unlocking other benefits. Social infrastructure can incubate ideas and energy and community. This means that the impact may not be seen for a while, but given the time to grow, it can be powerful and lasting. The approach should reflect this less tangible set of outcomes and less predictable timeframes.

An approach to evidencing outcomes of social infrastructure for residents

Across these ideas, an emergent set of outcomes describes what communities in the West Midlands feel enhancing social infrastructure should enable residents to think, feel and do:

Being part of communities that provide access to attractive, safe, welcoming spaces, and have a strong VCFSE sector, enables residents to...	
Think	• Know what local community spaces are available • Know how to access community spaces in a safe, affordable and quick way
Feel	• Feel welcomed and accepted in community spaces • Feel safe and supported in community spaces
Do	• Go to places where they can engage with their community • Go to places where they can learn, express themselves and/or pursue an interest or activity • Go to places where they can access support

This outcomes framework can help us to identify approaches to develop different types of evidence of the role of social infrastructure in the approach. In relation to VCFSE organisations, it is intended that these indicators will better capture the value they can bring; while recognising the wider challenges to how they are maintained.

Example approaches to evidencing resident-centred outcomes of social infrastructure	
Think	• Household survey questions asking about awareness of local community spaces, and perceptions of accessibility and affordability • Reporting from/ evaluation of VCFSE organisation funding that captures who uses their community spaces, ideally with a focus on marginalised demographic groups • Participatory and qualitative research with residents that explores the nature and extent of any barriers to accessing community spaces, covering safety, affordability and ease of travel to them
Feel	• Household survey questions asking about perceptions of acceptance, safety and support in local community spaces • Reporting from/ evaluation of VCFSE organisation funding that captures how their community spaces make people feel, and the extent to which users feel welcomed, accepted, safe and supported in these spaces • Evaluation of local authority-run community spaces that captures how these make people feel, and the extent to which users feel welcomed, accepted, safe and supported in these spaces • Participatory and qualitative research with residents that explores people feel in local community spaces
Do	• Attendance data from local community spaces, ideally broken down by demographic characteristics • Reporting from/ evaluation of VCFSE organisation funding, and local authority-run community spaces, that captures what community spaces enable residents to do – i.e. engage with their communities, learn, express themselves, pursue interests/activities, and/or access support

This can accompany existing secondary data sources on social infrastructure:

Data set	Indicators	Notes
Companies House [30]	• The number of CICs in an area, expressed as a proportion of the local population • The number of registered charities working at local authority level, expressed as a proportion of the local population	

Data set	Indicators	Notes
WMCA: Levelling up through green space access (New Economics Foundation[17])	• Green deprivation	
Catchment-based approach data hub (Rivers Trust[31])	• Area of accessible green and blue space per 1000 population	
Number of sports facilities (ONS[32])	• Counts of sports facilities across Local Authority Districts (LAD) per 10,000 people	
Cultural infrastructure map (WMCA[39])	• Cultural spaces • Community-focused spaces • Active Lives survey data	
Basic Libraries Dataset (Arts Council England[33])	• Total number of libraries in an area, expressed as a proportion of the local population	
Participation Survey 2022/23 (DCMS[40])	• Adult engagement with the arts in the last 12 months (physical) • Adult engagement with the arts in the last 12 months (digital) • Adult engagement with libraries in the last 12 months (physical) • Adult engagement with libraries in the last 12 months (digital) • Adult engagement with heritage sites in the last 12 months (physical) • Adult engagement with heritage sites in the last 12 months (digital) • Adult engagement with museums and galleries in the last 12 months (physical) • Adult engagement with museums and galleries in the last 12 months (digital) • Adult engagement with live sports in the last six months (physical)	Only adults aged over 16.

Data set	Indicators	Notes
Community Life Survey 2023/24 (DCMS) [40]	• Attractiveness of local area • Satisfaction with green and natural spaces in local area	As above.
Local authority surveys	• Perceptions and satisfaction with local area • Satisfaction with council services • Access to services	As above.

Among these, the following indicators have been selected as key and supporting barometers for monitoring change:

- Attractiveness of local area (Community Life Survey, DCMS)
- Satisfaction with green and natural spaces in local area (Community Life Survey, DCMS).
- Adult engagement with the arts in the last 12 months (physical) (Participation Survey, DCMS)[40] - regional comparison only
- Adult engagement with libraries in the last 12 months (physical) (Participation Survey, DCMS)[40] - regional comparison only

These intend to reflect different types of social infrastructure. Rather than counts, indicators of engagement, accessibility and quality of social infrastructures were prioritised to better reflect resident-centred outcomes. Furthermore, we can reasonably expect a regular time series for these data sets from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), with the ability to compare against other combined authority regions, and (in the case of the Community Life Survey) among local authorities within the WMCA region. Attractiveness of local area was selected as the primary indicator because it can encapsulate a diversity of social infrastructures. While 'attractiveness' of place aligns with some of the ways residents think about the quality of local social infrastructure, it is however limited in its ability to demonstrate many of the outcomes of social infrastructure that are important to residents, like feeling welcomed, accepted, safe and supported in spaces. Whether or not they participate and engage with community activities or spaces could be a good proxy for this. Among the types of infrastructure reported in the Participation Survey, data on engagement with physical infrastructures, and not digital infrastructures, was prioritised to reflect community understandings of these infrastructures. A high-level arts indicator[a] and libraries were chosen to capture and represent diverse types of social infrastructure (see explanation in footnote below).

[a] This includes participation in any of the following events (an exhibition of art, photography or sculptures; a play, drama, musical, Pantomime, Ballet, Opera; an event connected with books, reading, or writing; a cinema screening of a film or movie; a craft exhibition; a live music event; a festival or carnival; a street art event; a live dance event; a fashion show; a comedy event) and activities (writing stories, plays, or poetry; reading books or magazines; writing or performing music; painting, drawing, printmaking, calligraphy; crafts e.g. textile, ceramic, sculpting, carving, woodwork; choreographing or performing a drama or dance routine; designing or programming video games including on a smartphone or tablet; playing video games including on a smartphone or tablet; making films or videos as a hobby including original animations; photography as a hobby). Respondents were advised not to include paid work, school or college or structured academic activities.

Goal: An inclusive region

This goal is underpinned by the concept of **social inclusion**.

Through the peer research, we found that residents understood social inclusion in a range of ways, including:

- Feeling a sense of belonging.
- A welcoming environment where people from all backgrounds feel safe and included, with good healthcare and schooling.
- An environment which does not spark fear and worry for those with different backgrounds.
- Building a community where people engage with those who are not just 'like them', encouraging diversity and social acceptance.
- Supporting cultural diversity, language, social welfare and reducing isolation amongst different groups of people.
- Opportunities to engage with others and feel included within society through community programmes.
- Creating engaging and supportive activities for all ages, using technology and physical locations to share and connect.
- The extent to which people feel like they can join all social activities and commitments.

From the action learning sessions with local VCFSE organisations, we learnt that social inclusion happens at different levels/scales. The VCFSE representatives felt that it is important to make very specific adjustments for different needs and different groups, ultimately responding to people as individuals. This will help unlock the ability for people to use their unique skills, and move beyond merely 'accepting' difference, to instead valuing and celebrating it. In this way, a feeling of belonging can be achieved amongst community members.

Inclusion spans different scales: from face-to-face engagement with community members to community organisations engaging with funding processes. At all scales, there is no point just allowing anyone to take part if no provision for them to succeed is made – doing so would be setting them up to fail.

Community organisations are often expert at building relationships but may not have dedicated staff or high-calibre comms resources, which can cause issues with the timing and level of resource required to respond to tenders. Provision should be made for acknowledging and responding to track records, specific needs, and barriers related to community organisations. This can help cultivate a feeling of belonging, although such a feeling needs to include a feeling of being able to have an influence. Feelings are harder to measure than some other outcomes, but the Community Life Survey is the best existing proxy for how people 'feel' and 'belong'. This can be a type of value/impact that is sometimes overlooked

When using case studies or positive examples, there's the need to recognise that those who do get involved despite barriers may be exceptions rather than the rule.

Ultimately, embracing managing and negotiating tension and difference is key, and solves problems that covering it up would only exacerbate.

There should not be the expectation that everyone should just learn how to 'play the game'. Instead, the 'rules of the game' should be adapted, so that difference can be acknowledged and embraced.

An approach to evidencing outcomes of social inclusion for residents

Across these ideas, an emergent set of outcomes describes what communities in the West Midlands feel enhancing social inclusion should enable residents to think, feel and do:

Being part of welcoming communities that celebrate differences, and don't spark fear in those from different backgrounds, enables residents to…	
Think	• Know about diverse cultures and languages
Feel	• Feel a sense of belonging, rather than isolation • Feel welcomed, accepted and included, regardless of background • Feel safe, supported and able to live without fear or worry • Feel able to join social activities and commitments
Do	• Benefit from good quality healthcare, schooling, welfare and other support for their individual needs • Engage with diverse people who are 'not like them' and celebrate differences • Engage with intergenerational community activities, digitally or in-person • Share and connect with their community

This outcomes framework can help us to identify a set of indicators to provide different types of evidence of the role of social inclusion in the approach.

Example approaches to evidencing resident-centred outcomes of social inclusion	
Think	• Household survey questions asking about awareness of cultures and languages spoken in the region • Reporting from/ evaluation of VCFSE organisation funding and local services that captures ESOL support they provide • Participatory and qualitative research with residents that explores understandings of different cultures and multiculturality across the region
Feel	• Household survey questions asking about feelings of belonging, acceptance, inclusion, safety, support, fear, worry, and isolation, ideally broken down by demographic characteristics • Reporting from/ evaluation of VCFSE organisation funding that captures how their services contribute to feelings of belonging, acceptance, inclusion, safety and support among residents • Participatory and qualitative research with residents that explores feelings of belonging, acceptance, inclusion, safety and support in the region; and seeks to understand what enables/prevents residents from feeling able to join social activities and commitments in their communities

Example approaches to evidencing resident-centred outcomes of social inclusion	
Do	• Household survey questions asking about frequency of sharing and connection with others in their community • Participation data for digital and in-person community activities, ideally broken down by demographic characteristics • Evaluation of local service provision that assess the extent to which individuals' needs are met • Reporting from/ evaluation of VCFSE organisation funding that captures how their services enable residents to engage with diverse people who are 'not like them' and celebrate differences

This can accompany existing secondary data sources on social inclusion:

Data set	Indicators	Notes
Community Life Survey 2023/24 (DCMS) [40]	• Strength of feelings of belonging to immediate neighbourhood • Extent of agreement that your local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together • Formal Volunteering at least once a month in the last 12 months • Formal Volunteering at least once in the last 12 months • Extent of agreement that people in the neighbourhood pull together to improve the neighbourhood • Formal Volunteering at least once a month in the last 12 months • Formal Volunteering at least once in the last 12 months • Informal Volunteering at least once a month in the last 12 months • Informal Volunteering at least once in the last 12 months • Any volunteering at least once a month in the last 12 months • Any volunteering at least once in the last 12 months • Extent of agreement that you can personally influence decisions affecting the local area	As above. Overlap of some indicators with social capital.

Data set	Indicators	Notes
	• Engagement in civic participation activities in the last 12 months • Engagement in civic activism in the last 12 months • Engagement in civic consultation in the last 12 months • Involvement in social action in the last 12 months • Engagement in civic participation, activism or consultation activities in the last 12 months	
Local authority surveys	• Feelings of belonging and inclusion • Civic participation • Safety and anti-social behaviour • Satisfaction with council services • Accessing advice, support and information • Accessibility of services	As above.
Mutual Aid Wiki [34]	• Number of active mutual aid groups in an area, expressed as a proportion of the local population	

Among these, the following indicators have been selected as key and supporting barometers for monitoring change:

• Strength of feelings of belonging to immediate neighbourhood (Community Life Survey, DCMS)
• Extent of agreement that your local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together (Community Life Survey, DCMS).
• Extent of agreement that people in the neighbourhood pull together to improve the neighbourhood (Community Life Survey, DCMS).
• Engagement in civic participation, activism or consultation activities in the last 12 months (Community Life Survey, DCMS).

'Feelings of belonging' is a key idea that cuts across both academic and community understandings of social inclusion, therefore is included as the primary indicator. The supplementary indicators aim to capture resident-centred outcomes, like diversity and local engagement. While civic participation did not appear as strongly in community interpretations, it is also included as it is a central component of academic understandings of social inclusion. Across all these indicators form the Community Life Survey, we can reasonably expect a regular time series, with the ability to compare among local authorities within the WMCA region, and against other combined authority regions.

Goal: An equitable region

This goal is underpinned by the concept of **social mobility**.

Through the peer research, we found that residents understood social mobility in a range of ways, including:

• Venturing out and having freedom to be themselves, which will help navigate social ladders.
• People with social connections moving along together – a collective effort to mobilise the creation of scholarships and job skills.
• Opportunities that can be created through institutions such as schools, that can support the development of teenagers and children.
• Upskilling both in academic and life skills to support inclusion and integration into society at large, especially in both job and housing markets.
• Ability to access services and transportation which will help boost individuals' skill sets and work opportunities.
• Safety, education and housing options that are available and accessible to all
• Integration into new communities and feeling welcomed by existing members.

VCFSE organisations found social mobility can be a distraction from the fact that the problems are systemic. Putting the emphasis on 'the circumstances of an individual's birth' turns attention away from the systems and structures which have generated positive circumstances for some and negative circumstances for others. People's current circumstances should not determine their prospects. Everyone, with their unique challenges, should be supported to fulfil their potential.

The term itself may be unhelpful, as in policy terms it has a very narrow definition. A wider set of criteria against which support and progress of individuals within a community can be measured would be helpful, although not all these criteria are straightforward to measure.

Social mobility is often judged against the wrong things, and the comparison of child and parent incomes can be limiting. Other achievements such as education, as well as qualities such as kindness, courage and character, are more important to have, to value, to teach and to pass on. Thinking too narrowly about the term sets people up to fail. Thinking too narrowly about the pathways to personal success and fulfilment can also be a barrier, as non-standard routes towards attainment in education, skills, and employment are often vital for people with different types of needs (which could include needs around language, neurodiversity, or existing education levels.)

Social mobility is often seen as a relationship between different generations, but this perspective can overlook the fact that people of all ages can learn and progress in different ways and at different times in their lives. There is a need to support people of all ages to learn and develop so that longer-term barriers or reasons why people have not fulfilled their own ambitions can be addressed, such as through education and support for older adults. Aspirations should not be limited to the "next" generation, and nor should they be focused solely on children. This can mean supporting parents to help them realise that their own hopes can be fulfilled, and they can progress in different ways

Social mobility can be about unlocking opportunities, and this can require local knowledge of the barriers to reaching these opportunities, which could be mental, physical or environmental. Confidence and a feeling of being at home or welcomed in safe, familiar spaces are vital.

An approach to evidencing outcomes of social mobility for residents

Across these ideas, an emergent set of outcomes describes what communities in the West Midlands feel that enhancing social mobility should enable residents to think, feel and do:

Being part of communities that enable people to fulfil their potential no matter what their background or circumstances, and don't inhibit personal growth. enables residents to...	
Think	• Learn academic skills, skills for life and skills for work throughout their lives • Learn via a diversity of routes that support individual needs • Learn skills that support integration and inclusion in the local community, and society at large
Feel	• Feel able to be themselves • Feel welcomed by, and included in, the local community
Do	• Access transport, education, safety and support services that provide improved systemic conditions for social mobility • Access local housing and labour market opportunities, regardless of background or circumstances • Connect to people and places that can support and unlock collective opportunities

This outcomes framework can help us to identify a set of indicators to provide different types of evidence of the role of social mobility in the approach.

Example approaches to evidencing resident-centred outcomes of social mobility	
Think	• Household survey questions assessing knowledge of a diverse range of skills • Reporting from/ evaluation of VCFSE organisation funding that captures how their services support residents with skills development • Participatory and qualitative research with residents that explores the accessibility of diverse learning routes, and learning opportunities throughout the life-course
Feel	• Household survey questions asking about feelings of inclusion and belonging, ideally broken down by demographic characteristics • Reporting from/ evaluation of VCFSE organisation funding that captures how their services contribute to feelings of inclusion and belonging, and enables residents to feel able to be themselves • Participatory and qualitative research with residents that explores psychological safety in a range of places and contexts across the region

Example approaches to evidencing resident-centred outcomes of social mobility	
Do	• Household survey questions asking about perceptions of the accessibility of local transport, education, safety and support services; and local housing and labour markets • Participation data for local transport, education, safety and support services, ideally broken down by demographic characteristics • Housing market and labour marker statistics • Evaluation of the accessibility of local services, infrastructure and opportunities • Reporting from/ evaluation of VCFSE organisation funding that captures how they support and unlock collective opportunities • Participatory and qualitative research with residents that explores experiences of accessibility for services, infrastructure and opportunities across the region

This can accompany existing secondary data sources on social inclusion:

Data set	Indicators	Notes
Social mobility by area 2024 [41] (Social Mobility Commission)	• Promising prospects index • Conditions of childhood index • Labour market opportunities for young people index • Innovation and growth index Data on the following sub-domains is accessible: • Level of development at age five • Attainment at age 11 • Attainment at age 16 • Highest qualification • Economic activity • Unemployment • Occupational level of young people aged 25 to 29 years • Earnings of young people aged 25 to 29 years • Distribution of parental education • Distribution of parental occupation • Youth unemployment • Type of employment opportunities for young people	Indices reported in terms of distribution across English local authorities – indicates relative rather than absolute conditions. LA comparison only. Regional comparisons not advised, as regional estimates have a large margin of error, and most regions are close to average.

Data set	Indicators	Notes
	• Broadband speed • Business spending on research and development • Postgraduate education	
Level 2 and 3 attainment age 16 to 25 2022/23[45] (Department for Education)	• Percentage of 16-year-olds qualified to Level 2, by local authority, broken down by sex, Special Educational Need (SEN), type of SEN support, Free School Meal status, and disadvantaged status • Percentage of 19-year-olds qualified to Level 2, by local authority, broken down by sex, Special Educational Need (SEN), type of SEN support, Free School Meal status, and disadvantaged status • Percentage of 19-year-olds qualified to Level 2 by 19 but not 16, by local authority, broken down by sex, Special Educational Need (SEN), type of SEN support, Free School Meal status, and disadvantaged status • Percentage of 19-year-olds qualified to Level 3, by local authority, broken down by sex, Special Educational Need (SEN), type of SEN support, Free School Meal status, and disadvantaged status	For these indicators, regional data is reported as aggregated local authority figures.
Lightcast[36]	Job vacancies by industries, employers and skills	
Nomis [37]	The number of jobs per resident aged 16 to 64	
Children in low income families: local area statistics 2014 to 2024 [38] (Department for Work and Pensions)	Number of children living in families in absolute low income	

Among these, the following indicators have been selected as key and supporting barometers for monitoring change[41]:

- Promising prospects index (social mobility by area, Social Mobility Commission)
- Conditions of childhood index (social mobility by area, Social Mobility Commission).
- Labour market opportunities for young people index (social mobility by area, Social Mobility Commission).
- Innovation and growth index (social mobility by area, Social Mobility Commission).

Although these indices only enable comparison by local authority, not region, they were chosen as they aggregate numerous data sets to provide a fuller picture of a range of short-term, intermediate and long-term outcomes of social mobility than any of the qualifications, employment or income data sets can alone. As these indices are reported by the Social Mobility Commission, the analytical burden of aggregating numerous datasets does not need to be internalised, and we can reasonably expect that they will develop this approach to report updated data year on year.

Section 3: Development of the inclusive communities approach

This section provides further detail on the key activities undertaken, and key insights gathered, that informed and shaped the approach and recommendations.

What we aimed to achieve

The primary objective was to gather insight for the development of an inclusive communities approach, that would enable the WMCA to:

1. Build a shared understanding for inclusive communities with our partners, stakeholders, and communities, so that all can identify and capitalise on their roles and responsibilities in achieving a shared vision.
2. Foster greater community confidence in the WMCA, by strengthening our approaches to power and participation, capacity building and investment into communities.
3. Connect programme activity, enabling us to better target interventions and measure impact.
4. Position inclusive communities as a strategic priority, alongside economy, housing, or regeneration.

Therefore, this work set out to articulate an overarching vision and ambition for inclusive communities alongside identifying shared regional priorities with proposed indicators to assess progress. It was important for this work to be rooted in the evidence and experiences of those in the West Midlands, responding to the unique culture and context of the region. The activities undertaken (detailed below) to gather insight demonstrate a commitment to hearing from diverse voices to better inform an approach that works for all involved.

What we did and the key learnings

The process of creating the approach was collaborative – drawing on the insight, expertise and energy of diverse partners from across the region: residents, VCFSE organisations, local authorities, and the combined authority. It was designed to tackle both the technical and cultural challenges of co-producing a robust inclusive communities approach that could incorporate learning around a complex set of interrelated concepts, whilst ensuring it was relevant to a wide range of internal and external partners.

Technical challenges - the disparate and inconsistent availability of data, alongside the scale of initiatives, activities and people involved in work connected to this area.

Cultural challenges - creating the conditions to support people to think and work in new ways, to challenge assumptions, redefine value and develop stronger relationships with communities.

The overall process was iterative, but at a top-level can be summarise by the following flow:

Desk research > Peer research > Test and learn projects > Local authority engagement and testing > Combined authority engagement and testing

Desk research

A desk-based review of the academic literature on inclusive communities, local policy plans, international best practice, existing frameworks for measuring themes associated with inclusive communities and an initial view of relevant and available West Midlands data.

This was undertaken to ascertain the current national and regional picture in relation to inclusive communities and to develop an initial understanding of the common definitions and indicators used to describe and measure inclusive communities.

Key learnings:

Political landscape: At the national and mayoral level, there is a strong narrative of the need for a more joined-up approach to support communities. At the local authority level across West Midlands there is an increasing commitment to strategic approaches that foreground inclusion, but not a regional or aligned picture. Both the new Labour government and recently elected West Midlands Mayor, Richard Parker, embody an opportunity to supercharge this commitment through tangible actions. The WMCA inclusive communities approach is well-timed and well-placed to become the mechanism for aligning national and regional priorities and enabling action.

'Deficit' models of community: Policy relating to inclusivity risks taking a 'deficit' approach where places communities are seen as problematic due to eg, low levels of social capital or cohesion and in need of 'fixing'. This raises the importance of not relying solely on quantitative measures to map inclusivity and to create a balanced picture across the region, recognising and highlighting strengths.

Mobilising groups of people to work together and building ownership through participation: Engaging communities to work collaboratively towards shared goals can support greater social cohesion, whilst building social capital through social action. This creates a sense of ownership over infrastructure, policy and processes. The WMCA inclusive communities approach needs to empower communities to take action.

Capabilities need to be to embedded within the WMCA to make long-term social inclusion successful, to help build a bridge between the combined authority and communities and to improve trust, to make this piece of work sustainably effective in the long-term. A holistic, long-term approach is required, recognising that embedded systemic issues can only be solved in the long term.

This desk research informed and underpinned the subsequent stages of engagement.

Peer research

Participatory and creative workshops using trained community peer researchers in each of the seven local authority areas, undertaken to understand community lived experience and priorities.

Key learnings:

One of the key points taken forward into the rest of the process was that the standard policy definitions for the four concepts around which thinking about the approach had been framed (social capital; social infrastructure; social mobility; and social inclusion) needed re-expressing for community members to engage with, because the language used in them did not resonate with everyday experience. The approach should reflect and integrate the ways that the concepts are understood and experienced by residents and communities.

By the final peer research workshops, communities had begun to merge these definitions into one, identifying themes and key words that stretched across the concepts:

- Supportive
- Access
- Safety (physical and emotional)
- Diversity
- Relationships (with each other and with the council)
- Conversation

Test and learn projects

Nine VCFSE organisations that stretched across the four overlapping social concepts and geographical region were engaged to understand community life across the West Midlands area, co-produce the inclusive communitiesapproach, and start building the foundations of a movement. Participation through a series of nine facilitated workshops allowed participants to share their perspectives on different aspects of 'inclusive communities'.

Key learnings:

- *A desire for VCFSE organisations to be valued as equal partners:* The ongoing presence of organisations and their long-term relationships within their communities are unique but often underappreciated. Community groups should be celebrated, and their stories told.
- *Funding is a systemic challenge:* The impact of austerity and problems with the funding system is a fundamental issue that organisations seek to both oppose and exist within. The approach must respond to the limitations imposed by austerity, whilst also looking for solutions.
- *Procurement processes should be improved:* Goals, focuses, and timeframes in tendering processes are set by funders, rather than VCFSE organisations. Community insight should also inform what is measured or prioritised. Tenders should be made less onerous to respond to, so that resource-strapped organisations are not kept from tackling the issues they should be focusing on.
- *Data is valuable but has its limits:* Funding usually focuses on outputs, which are more tangible and often data-driven, rather than impact, which is more important but can be harder to measure. Success should be measured qualitatively as well as quantitatively, taking into account what residents think, feel and do.
- *The test and learn process is a model for the approach:* Participants appreciated that the test and learn process was undertaken in an open, transparent and collaborative manner, allowing them to share their experiences and to have the opportunity to influence systemic region-wide issues. The approach should embody in practice the principles it wishes to uphold.

Local authority engagement and testing

Officers from across the region and in different departments were engaged through two working sessions to steer and test the idea of an inclusive communities approach for the region.

Key learnings:

- *Recognition of potential:* The role of local authorities in both creating and ultimately using the approach is crucial, particularly given the challenge of austerity across the region and

the resultant strain on resources, which limits opportunities to collaborate or innovate. Local authorities must have a defined role and be allowed to take ownership of the approach.

- *Need for clarity around the purpose:* The approach has potential to convene officers across the region and to create space for collaboration, but to be truly action-oriented it must be clear about next steps whilst also offering a route to a longer-term shift in culture and mindsets. Duplication of existing plans and strategies needs to be avoided.
- *WMCA can have a key convening role:* The combined authority is uniquely placed in the region to bring together different partners – in particular local authorities - to share best practice, network and explore opportunities for further collaboration such as jointly developing capacity or addressing similar challenges, benefitting from economies of scale.
- *Joined up insight and decision-making, particularly external funding:* The approach could be a fulcrum for regional actions that might particularly appeal to national funders. The approach should have a strategic co-ordination function, giving visibility on how region-wide challenges are currently being addressed, and informing the direction of travel for future initiatives.
- *Advocacy and a collective 'voice:'* In providing a strategic region-wide perspective, the approach could unlock the development of advocacy coalitions which could help the whole West Midlands speak with a more authoritative and evidence-based collective voice. The approach should tell the story of the entire WMCA region, outlining the challenges and unlocking opportunities.

Combined authority engagement and testing

Regular meetings with core team and other WMCA officers, including the Policy Working Group, to update on progress, get input into the process, and steer next steps. Once progress had been made in the development of the approach senior staff within different departments were consulted, to introduce The Inclusive Communities Approach and gather their feedback.

Key learnings:

- *A regional responsibility to residents:* The inclusive communities approach represents a regional responsibility to residents, and the combined authority should play a key 'value add' role in supporting a more joined-up and collaborative approach to inclusive communities.
- *Complementary not repetitive:* Combined authority officers recognise the potential of the approach, but it must complement rather than replicate existing initiatives such as the Inclusive Growth Framework. This requires an understanding of how the approach relates to other initiatives across the region.
- *Incremental not immediate:* Key hooks for collaboration are vital for disseminating and implementing the approach. Rather than an overnight shift to full adoption across every audience in the entire region, the approach needs to be action-oriented, with these actions both addressing challenges and unlocking further opportunities, enabling widespread adoption of the approach and a shift in culture.
- *Desire for collaboration*. Within the combined authority, there is appetite for increased collaboration, but a perception that departments operate in silos. There is an opportunity for the approach to respond to the latent demand for collaboration, both within the combined authority and beyond.

Wider engagement

We undertook sessions connecting with work elsewhere, such as Manchester Live Well, and the MHCLG.

Key learnings: Other regions are developing similar approaches (with Manchester further along), but the work takes time, and importance is placed on developing relationships – the approach should take this long-term thinking into account.

Challenges and opportunities informing the approach

As development progressed, a set of challenges and opportunities emerged. These are grouped thematically below:

Data: There is currently insufficient data at the right level of detail across the region to create a purely data-driven approach to sufficiently understand and evidence the value of inclusive communities. Quantitative data can only go so far – illustrations of qualitative lived experience are also vital to tell the story of what residents think, feel and do. There are a wide range of needs and use cases of data (within the combined authority and beyond) that influence how it should be gathered and presented. Increased collaboration and alignment are needed to enable effective analysis, to be able to illustrate and respond to the different experiences of residents and communities across the region.

Funding: Funding is top of the agenda across the region. In practical terms, a lack of funding negatively impacts the delivery of services, and crucially the time, space and resource needed to collaborate and innovate. Conceptually, the paralysing omnipresence of the funding challenge creates an inability to 'see past it'. National policies around devolution may offer opportunities to address this challenge, as will demonstrating the value and impact that community organisations bring.

Alignment: The translation of, and alignment around terms is key – vocabulary and concepts mean different things to different people, making collaboration difficult. Existing established initiatives, such as Walsall's 'resilient communities' can provide a insight into related terms and should be complemented rather than replicated. The approach should provide benefits that cannot be achieved by individual partners acting alone.

Connection, collaboration and learning: There is significant appetite for connecting, sharing and building joint capacity, but often a lack of opportunity to do so. Convening spaces to share best practice and facilitate learning from others will in turn help to address other region-wide challenges, avoiding siloed working.

Trust and relationships: There is a need to reimagine and commit to new ways of working to address deeply entrenched issues like funding and power dynamics. This can only be achieved through developing stronger relationships, which will in turn help to shift mindsets. A shared set of values needs to be firstly defined, and then put into practice.

Reflecting multiple audiences: As the range of audiences is wide, the inclusive communities approach needs to balance and prioritise a wide range of needs, wants and use cases, being widely applicable, yet also specifically actionable.

Changing the rules of the game. Some of the challenges facing the West Midlands are tough and deeply embedded. Whilst some 'quick fixes' have been suggested to remove barriers, actions need to also contribute to systemic change in the longer term. The pathways to action section below outlines the relationship between short term action and long-term systems change and impact.

Section 4: Participating VCFSE organisations

Individuals involved in the Test and learn workshops and the organisations they are part of:

Leah Hudson, Bfriends

Bfriends Friends of Birmingham Children's Trust is an independent charity developed and designed by children in care and care leavers with city partners and Birmingham Children's Trust. Bfriends works closely in partnership with Birmingham Children's Trust gaining a close understanding of the additional things that children known to the trust need.

Lorna Prescott, CoLab Dudley

Is a place-based social lab based in Dudley, which convenes local people, doers and creatives of all kinds, to develop experiments and projects which invite collective imagination and cultural action.

Muhammad Sibi, Gambian Islamic Community Centre (Part of Inclusive Muslim Action Network (IMAN), Sandwell)

The GICC's mission is to create and maximise positive opportunities for the wider community of Sandwell by providing cultural orientation, educational development and skills training for children and adults, through the provision of accessible community services and activities.

Cathy Sinton, Debbie Hett and Scott Baldwin, Gateway Family Services, Solihull

Gateway Family Services is a community-driven organisation dedicated to improving health and wellbeing by connecting people with the support they need. They tackle health inequalities at their root—empowering individuals through community outreach, resilience-building, and sustainable support for lasting change.

Clare Wightman and Mel Smith, Grapevine Coventry

Grapevine helps all kinds of people experiencing isolation, poverty and disadvantage in Coventry and Warwickshire – the organisation strengthens people, sparks action and shifts power across services. The organisation strengthens people by uncovering their talents and passions, works intensively with systems and services like the NHS and local authorities to understand issues together, shift power and solve the real problem – for good, and helps people build power to spark movements for change in their communities.

Imam Ghulam-Rasool, Inclusive Muslim Action Network (IMAN), Sandwell

The Inclusive Muslim Action Network (IMAN) was created in October 2008 to form a collective voice for Muslims in Sandwell. Invitation to the network was extended to various faith organisations as well as Muslim community members. The IMAN is set up to give the Group a platform to address current issues affecting the Muslim community

Gayle Johnston and Terri Fryer, Manor Farm Community Association

Manor Farm Community Association is a charity that has been providing a wide range of community services and activities for the people of Walsall for more than 47 years – the organisation provides leisure, education and recreational services.

Hafsha Shaikh, Smartlyte – Get Families Talking

Working closely with their parent company, SmartLyte, Get Families Talking deliver learning in all shapes and sizes – all with the aim of building aspiration, resilience and ambition.

James Clarke, The Hub at Ashmore Park

Located at the heart of Ashmore Park, The Hub is home to a Community Centre, Library and Fitness Centre and offers a wide range of facilities to local people. Owned by Wolverhampton City Council, the building is managed by volunteers from Ashmore Park Community Association, a registered charity.

Iram Fardus, Witton Lodge Community Association

Witton Lodge Community Association started life in 1994, established by local residents, in response to plans to demolish the Perry Common estate. They continue to help the local community by delivering a range of support and services for local people across multiple venues.

(It should be noted that the individuals were not officially 'representing' these organisations, but instead shared their own lived experience, which includes insight and knowledge about the organisations and the work they do.)

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