



Community Power, Social Infrastructure and Resilience

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Melanie Bonney LL.B FRSA
COAST AND VALE COMMUNITY ACTION
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Thematic analysis: Community Power, Social Infrastructure and Resilience

Scope and purpose

This analysis synthesises findings from the following community conversation and engagement activities:

- CaVCA Community Research Network ‘Finding Our Voice’ series (2022-24)
- CaVCA Long Term Plan for Towns engagement (2024)
- CaVCA Plan for Neighbourhoods engagement (2025)
- People’s Powerhouse Coast To Coast Conversations (2025-26) and
- CaVCA’s Community Power Week findings (March 2026).

The voices of over 1300 local people informed these findings.

It focuses on recurring themes relevant to Community Power, especially community priorities, levels of engagement, trust, self-determination, and implications for stronger collaboration between communities and systems leaders.

The report is intended to inform future work on Community Power, Social Infrastructure and Resilience in Scarborough and wider.

Method note

This is a qualitative thematic analysis based on reported workshop notes, facilitated conversations, postcards, outreach discussions and consultation summaries. It is interpretive rather than statistical. Percentages and attendance figures from the consultation reports are included where available, but the emphasis here is on repeated patterns of meaning across findings rather than formal coding counts.

This report frames our findings in the context of community resilience, social infrastructure and economic security.

Executive summary

Across over three years of conversations, hearing over 1300 local voices, participants consistently describe a town with strong community assets, care and goodwill, but also deep frustration with visible decline, fragmented services, weak responsiveness from institutions, and a sense of distance from decision-making power.

Communities are not apathetic in the sense of not caring; rather, many people appear weary, distrustful of formal systems, and unconvinced that participation leads to change. At the same time, our findings show clear belief in the value of collective action, trusted relationships, informal community spaces, and locally rooted leadership.

This is not a story of disengagement. It is a story of communities that care deeply but feel unable to influence change. At the same time, national policy and research are increasingly clear:

- Community resilience depends on social infrastructure – the everyday places, relationships and networks that enable people to connect and act
- Economic security depends on more than income – it relies on stable housing, relationships and local support systems
- Communities are most resilient when they have agency – when connection becomes power.

The central Community Power challenge is therefore not simply how to increase participation, but how to convert existing care, insight and goodwill into shared agency, practical influence and collaborative action. Community Power is not an optional engagement approach – it is essential infrastructure for economic security and community resilience. Scarborough does not lack ideas, care or willingness. What is missing is the bridge between lived experience and influence.

Key Insight: From community connection to community power

CaVCA's community conversations show that community power in Scarborough is not an abstract democratic ideal, but a practical resilience strategy: rebuilding the everyday places, relationships, trust and routes to influence that enable people to withstand hardship, resist division and act together on the future of their town.

Scarborough's communities already hold strong relationships, deep local knowledge, lived experience and a willingness to act. But they often lack access to decision making, responsive systems and practical routes to influence. The issue is not participation – it is power. Communities hold the relationships, insights and motivation

needed for change. The role of the system is not to generate engagement, but to enable **community agency** to translate into outcomes.

The March 2026 Josphe Rowntree Foundation Blog [Why social infrastructure matters for economic security <https://www.jrf.org.uk/neighbourhoods-and-communities/why-social-infrastructure-matters-for-economic-security>] states that strong social infrastructure provides the foundation for the three core components of community resilience, namely social connectedness, resource availability and structures to support agency and empowerment.

When people feel valued as part of a community, strong social bonds and informal networks develop providing essential mutual support in times of need. Addressing the themes below, collaboratively with communities, unlocks social capital and builds the needed social infrastructure which will, with responsive systems, unlock community power.

Key Strategic Themes

Theme	Strategic Insight
Place and Pride	The physical environment shapes confidence, dignity and belonging
Social Infrastructure	Relationships and community spaces underpin resilience
Systems Barriers	Complex systems reduce agency and weaken trust
Housing	Secure housing is foundational to participation and stability
Young People	Investment in youth is investment in future resilience
Trust	Trust has shifted from institutions to local relationships
Community Power	People need a trusted routemap from lived experience to direct influence
Engagement	Engagement is not the problem – a lack of action, change and impact is

Theme 1: Place, decline and civic pride

A dominant theme across our conversations is concern about the visible state of Scarborough. Participants repeatedly mention empty buildings, empty shops, derelict sites, litter, roads, pavements, toilets, water quality, and the general appearance of the town. These issues recur in both open community conversations and more structured consultation work, suggesting they are deeply embedded local concerns rather than one-off complaints.

Importantly, participants do not describe these issues as superficial. The state of the town is linked to identity, pride, safety, wellbeing and whether people feel hopeful about the future. In Finding Our Voice 5, people describe Scarborough as “looking and feeling dilapidated,” “underinvested,” and in “managed decline,” while also recognising its natural assets and the friendliness of many of its communities. The Community Power Week notes similarly refer to “sense of loss,” “sadness,” “lack of pride,” and “the optimism seems to have gone.”

This theme suggests that physical regeneration and civic renewal cannot be treated separately. Visible neglect appears to have symbolic force: it tells people something about how much their place is valued, and they themselves are valued, which in turn shapes confidence, belonging and willingness to act.

The Government’s Pride in Place Strategy 2025

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pride-in-place-strategy> explicitly frames ‘the view from the doorstep’ as a national barometer of success. Decline erodes trust and cohesion; improvement rebuilds confidence and participation. The physical environment is not just cosmetic – it is psychological and physical infrastructure.

Pride in Place also argues that neighbourhood renewal must be visible, local and community-led, with people shaping decisions about assets, public space, high streets and services. Our findings give this national strategy a grounded Scarborough evidence base: people’s concerns about empty buildings, public realm, safety, toilets, transport and youth spaces are not cosmetic – they are about dignity, belonging, pride and whether people believe that change is possible. If local people feel valued, connections form, social capital builds with the resulting social infrastructure creating collective agency and, with responsive systems, community power.

Theme 2: Community connection is both a need and a form of infrastructure

A second major theme is the importance of relationships, social connection and welcoming community spaces. Participants repeatedly describe loneliness, isolation, lack of youth provision, lack of safe spaces, lack of local facilities, and the erosion of places where people naturally come together. In Finding Our Voice 1, loneliness and isolation sit alongside unemployment, cost of living, poor housing and access to services as key struggles. In Finding Our Voice 4, participants explicitly link social connections to resilience, community safety, knowledge sharing, trust, crisis response and inclusion.

The findings also show that people understand social connection in practical terms. They talk about neighbours, groups, volunteering, smile-and-say-hello culture, informal gathering points, safe and inclusive spaces, and community hubs rooted in everyday life rather than formal services alone. The notes stress that authentic hubs may be bus

stops, school gates, parent groups or existing activity spaces, and that engagement must therefore be agile and go where people already are.

This is significant for Community Power. The conversations suggest that connection is not merely a “soft” outcome. It functions as social infrastructure: without it, communities are less resilient, less able to include newcomers, less able to respond to crisis, and less likely to mobilise collectively. With it, trust and participation become more possible.

The Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods report [Social infrastructure and social capital – the active elements of community resilience Nov. 2025

<https://www.neighbourhoodscommission.org.uk/report/social-infrastructure-and-social-capital-the-active-elements-of-community-resilience/>] frames parks, libraries, community centres, schools, sports spaces and everyday gathering places as the platforms where bridging and linking social capital form. Our conversations say the same in local language – bus stops, school gates, parent groups, community hubs, safe spaces, volunteering and neighbourliness are where trust and agency begin.

Theme 3: Services are experienced as fragmented, inaccessible and disempowering

Concerns about service access and quality recur strongly throughout our findings, especially around health, social care, transport, dentistry, GP access, mental health support and youth provision. The NHS-focused conversation is especially clear: participants speak of poor communication, lack of continuity, long waits, digital exclusion, inconsistent GP experiences, unexplained referral rejections, and a sense that people are not treated holistically. They also note that many people no longer seek help in a timely way because the experience of trying to access care is so poor.

A similar pattern appears elsewhere. Finding Our Voice 1 notes concerns about access to services, transport, disability-related barriers and over-digitisation. Community Power Week records people saying they can take steps to change things but then get stuck in “the system,” which is experienced as disempowering. The town-level consultations also connect transport, safety, toilets and accessible public space with whether people can participate fully in community life.

This theme highlights a crucial distinction: people are not only concerned about the volume of provision, but about the experience of navigating systems. The material repeatedly suggests that complexity, inconsistency and weak coordination erode confidence and agency. Systems are often experienced not as enabling, but as draining.

Over digitisation is also an important point – access to services digitally requires a level of literacy – during one of our community power week sessions it was reported that 40%

of adults in the Scarborough area lack basic functional literacy skills. This indicates that in order to prevent further disempowerment, human touch points are essential.

Nationally too, research shows <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202324-annual-publication/community-life-survey-202324-civic-engagement-and-social-action> that only a minority (23%) feel able to influence decisions affecting their area, and that complexity of systems reduces agency and weakens influence. Fragmented systems do not just fail to deliver services, they also actively suppress community agency. Integration and simplification within systems are not efficiency measures, they are empowerment strategies, that must be developed with real human connections and understanding.

Theme 4: Housing insecurity is a structural threat to a good life and strong communities

Housing is one of the most persistent themes across the dataset. Participants raise affordability, second homes and holiday lets, poor quality private rented accommodation, insecure tenancies, homelessness, rent pressures, landlord power, housing disrepair and the shortage of suitable housing for local residents. In Finding Our Voice 3, housing is explicitly identified as one of the key ingredients of a “good life,” while homelessness, insecurity and rent-related pressures are named as direct threats to that good life.

In Community Power Week and later consultation reports, housing concerns are tied not only to individual hardship but to broader civic outcomes: the availability of affordable homes, the vitality of the town centre, the balance between residents and visitors, and whether local people can remain rooted in place including whether young people can get on the housing ladder

This suggests housing should be understood not as a standalone sectoral issue but as a central determinant of community stability, belonging and participation. If people cannot live securely in the communities they sustain, community power is weakened at source.

The National Pride in Place Strategy recognises that housing is core to thriving communities; whilst the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s blog ‘Why social infrastructure matters for economic security’ (March 2026) highlights economic security being a result of stable housing, good relationships and effective support systems.

Theme 5: Young people are underserved, under-trusted and central to renewal

Throughout our conversations, participants consistently raise concern about a lack of safe spaces, youth provision, opportunities, support into employment, and wider positive pathways for children and young people. There is also a recurring critique that young people are too often framed as a problem rather than as a resource. Community Power Week explicitly notes that “young people [are] treated as the problem not the solution,” while the Long Term Plan for Towns engagement states that many participants blamed the lack of facilities for perceived youth anti-social behaviour.

The 2025 Plan for Neighbourhoods consultation is especially strong on this point: almost all under-25s mentioned the need for safe spaces, and there were repeated suggestions for youth chill-out spaces, activity opportunities, digital media skills, watersports and other constructive offers.

This theme has strategic importance. The documents imply that investment in young people is not only about youth wellbeing; it is also about civic renewal, aspiration, safety and **future leadership**. If Community Power is to be generationally durable, young people need to be treated as co-creators of local solutions, not merely recipients of services or objects of concern. An example of this is The Street, Coast and Vale Community Action’s flagship community building in the heart of Scarborough, partly funded through HM Government’s My Place programme 2012 where a youth panel working with architects and project managers directed the design and build of the facility, which has remained an active youth and community facility since.

Pride in Place directly focuses on the empowerment of young people and the wider resilience argument that safe youth spaces, activities, leadership routes and trusted relationships and preventative infrastructure. Investment in young people is investment in future community resilience and leadership.

Theme 6: Trust in formal systems is weak, but trust in relationships remains possible

The various findings show a consistent pattern of low trust in formal systems, alongside stronger trust in relationships, local groups and intermediaries. Community Power Week <https://cavca.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Community-Power-Week-Findings-Report.pdf> explicitly records “loss of trust,” while Finding Our Voice 5 notes that many participants felt remote from power and that trusted relationships are key. The NHS conversation raises lack of confidence in the NHS, lack of continuity, lack of respect for lived experience, and a culture that presents a rosier picture than reality. The Long Term Plan for Towns report notes that almost a quarter of interactions expressed cynicism about whether consultation would make any difference.

At the same time, the findings point repeatedly to the importance of trusted local relationships. These include neighbours, community groups, volunteers, champions,

carers' networks, existing activity spaces, and organisations able to act as trusted intermediaries.

Taken together, these findings suggest that trust has not disappeared; it has shifted location. Many participants appear more willing to trust people, groups and spaces that feel **rooted, consistent and human** than distant institutions or generic consultation processes. This matters because it indicates that rebuilding trust may depend less on better messaging and more on different behaviours: visibility, continuity, responsiveness, practical follow-through and shared problem-solving.

National evidence shows declining institutional trust but persistent local connection – trust has not disappeared, it has relocated to a community level. More In Common's cohesion research [The State of Social Cohesion in 2026 <https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/latest-insights/the-state-of-social-cohesion-in-2026-2/>] echoes our local findings: many people feel disconnected from society, with financially insecure people feeling this most sharply, younger people especially. Systems must work through trusted local intermediaries, not around them.

Theme 7: Self-determination is desired, but often constrained by powerlessness

Perhaps the most important theme for Community Power is the tension between people's desire for agency and their experience of powerlessness. In Community Power Week, participants identify "Residents, Me, Us, Community" as a major seat of power, yet also speak of loss of trust, widening divides and the disempowerment that comes from getting stuck in systems. In Finding Our Voice 5, very few participants felt close to power, some said they had "zero power," and many felt more remote from power following local government change. However, there was also clear recognition that collective action can create power.

Finding Our Voice 4 adds a critical nuance: kind and inclusive communities cannot be imposed from above. Participants say communities need the autonomy and independence to want to build kinder places. Finding Our Voice 6 develops this further, with explicit discussion of taking back power through knowledge, accessible information, spokespeople, networks, community champions, narrative-building and focused campaigns. The later sessions move beyond diagnosis towards practical activation, including prioritised local projects.

This theme suggests that self-determination is not absent. Rather, it is unevenly resourced. People can imagine agency and often have clear ideas, but their capacity to act depends on confidence, knowledge, networks, facilitation, time, and whether systems respond in ways that reinforce rather than undermine action.

Jospeh Rowntree Foundation's blog "From Community Connection to Community Power" <https://www.jrf.org.uk/neighbourhoods-and-communities/from-community-connection-to-community-power> makes the crucial move: relationships and networks matter, but they need to be converted into agenda-setting, service-shaping and systems change. People in Scarborough need the routemap from lived experience to direct influence.

Theme 8: There is substantial engagement, but it is fragile and conditional

The consultation reports show that many people do engage. The Long Term Plan for Towns work recorded 381 individual interactions, while the Plan for Neighbourhoods work recorded 408. These included workshops, postcards, online input, outreach sessions and targeted engagement with young people. Other events also drew meaningful participation, including 311 participants in the Finding Our Voice events and eight resident workshops during Community Power Week.

However, the qualitative material shows that engagement is conditional. People are more likely to engage when conversations are local, specific, relational and hosted in trusted settings. They are less likely to engage when participation feels extractive, top-down, overly formal, inaccessible or unlikely to produce results. This is reflected in repeated references to cynicism, fatigue, fear, low confidence, time poverty, transport barriers, digital exclusion and feeling unheard.

The implication is that low formal participation should not be read as indifference. The documents suggest a better interpretation: there is strong underlying concern and willingness, but participation is fragile because too many people have learnt that the effort of engaging may not be matched by meaningful response. Engagement is not the problem – a lack of action, change and impact is.

Cross-cutting theme – social media, division and community resilience

Evidence from throughout our conversations highlights that social media is a power base in itself and can play a significant role in shaping community cohesion – both positively and negatively. As reported in the Independent Review of Social Cohesion (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities March 2023 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fd791c65ca2f00117da8b6/Independent_review_of_social_cohesion_and_resilience_-_Analysis_of_the_call_for_evidence.pdf), while digital platforms can support

connection, they can also amplify division, particularly in communities where trust and social connectedness are already low.

Local evidence shows that divisive groups actively use social media to spread misinformation, recruit support and inflame tensions. In Hope Not Hate's 2024 report *Fear and Hope 2024: The Case For Community Resilience* <https://hopenothate.org.uk/fear-and-hope-2024/> it is highlighted that in low resilience communities misinformation spreads more easily, and even after major events, this misinformation continues to spread. Social media doesn't just host division, it can accelerate faster than communities can respond, especially where trust is already low.

Platform design also plays a role with algorithms amplifying extreme or emotive content which can create echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs and increase polarisation. There is a need to address online spaces that normalise harmful narratives. Physical community spaces help to challenge these narrative through face to face dialogue, as reported in the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods social infrastructure report (referenced above). The issue isn't social media itself, it's how it interacts with low trust., low connection and inequality.

Communities with strong infrastructure and opportunities for face to face interaction are better able to challenge harmful narratives and resist division. When these foundations are weak, social media can fill the gap, often with distorted or harmful narratives.

All of this underlines the importance of investing in community spaces, relationships and local trust. Strengthening community resilience is not only about addressing online harms directly but about ensuring people have the connections, confidence and shared spaces needed to counter division in all its forms.

Cross-cutting emotional pattern

Across our findings, there is a strong emotional undercurrent of grief, sadness, frustration, fear and fatigue, especially in relation to decline, services, safety, loss of local assets, and perceived lack of influence. Community Power Week explicitly records "sense of loss," "sadness," "apathy" and a need for "hope and positivity." Finding Our Voice 5 speaks of mistrust and division, while the good life and self-care discussions point to overwhelm, pressure, burnout, isolation and low confidence.

Yet this sits alongside strong affection for place, valuing of open spaces and heritage, belief in community assets, and a desire to contribute. This combination suggests not detachment, but what might be described as hurt attachment: people care deeply, but often feel let down. That emotional pattern matters because it shapes how mobilisation needs to happen. Calls to participate will land differently depending on whether people feel hopeful, respected and likely to be effective.

CaVCA is currently developing work with York St John University around exploring collective grief / loss and its impact on community divisions.

Implications for Community Power

1. Community Power work should start from existing care, not assumed apathy

The evidence shows that people have strong views, care about local outcomes, and are willing to talk constructively. The issue is not a lack of interest in place, but weak confidence that systems will listen or act. Community Power should therefore avoid deficit narratives about “hard to reach” or “apathetic” communities and instead focus on **unlocking the agency already present**.

2. Trust-building needs to be practical, not rhetorical

Because trust in systems is weak, rebuilding it will likely require visible follow-through, consistent contact, named relationships, and small but meaningful examples of shared action. **Trusted intermediaries and community-rooted organisations** appear to be especially important in bridging between residents and systems.

3. Shared power should be demonstrated through tangible local wins

The documents suggest people respond strongly to concrete issues such as safe spaces, lighting, transport, youth activity, public realm improvements, empty buildings and neighbourhood facilities. Visible progress on such issues may be an important route to rebuilding civic confidence and showing that collective action can work.

4. Community spaces and social infrastructure should be treated as strategic, not peripheral

Safe, informal, inclusive places where people can connect, get information and act together appear central to community resilience and participation. Supporting these spaces is likely to be as important as funding formal programmes.

5. Systems leaders may need to shift from consultation to enabling

A recurring message is that communities do not want things done to them. They want to be listened to, trusted, resourced and supported to act. For systems leaders, this implies a shift from periodic engagement towards ongoing enabling relationships: sharing information, removing barriers, backing community-led action, and responding visibly to community priorities.

Strategic Implications for Systems Leaders

1. Community power = economic infrastructure

- Supports participation and employment
- Reduces demand on services
- Strengthens local economies

2. Social Infrastructure = Preventative Investment

- Builds resilience to shocks
- Strengthen cohesion and undermines division
- Delivers long term value

3. Trust is Built Through Action

- Visible change matters
- Consistency matters
- Follow-through matters

4. Shift from Delivery to Enabling

- From 'doing to' to 'working with'
- From 'outputs' to 'outcomes'

5. Power Must Be Tangible

- Real influence over decisions
- Control of resources
- Local ownership

Conclusion

Taken together, these conversations describe a community landscape marked by strong attachment to place, deep frustration with decline and systemic failure, and persistent belief in the value of collective local action. People often feel distant from formal power, distrustful of consultation, and worn down by inaccessible systems. But they also repeatedly show that trusted relationships, informal community spaces, practical collaboration and visible outcomes can create the conditions for agency.

Scarborough's community conversations align strongly with emerging national thinking:

- Communities with strong relationships, spaces and agency are more resilient
- Economic security depends on local support systems, not just income
- Trust and cohesion are built through participation that leads to real change.

Community power is the mechanism through which social infrastructure becomes resilience, and resilience becomes economic security. Our town does not lack ideas or care. It lacks the system conditions that allow these to become real and positive change.

The strategic task is therefore clear – we need to build the bridge between community insight and system power – and treat that bridge as essential infrastructure.

About Coast and Vale Community Action (CaVCA)

Coast and Vale Community Action (CaVCA) is a registered charity and not-for-profit company with over 100 years' experience supporting coastal and rural communities in North Yorkshire. CaVCA works alongside communities, voluntary organisations and wider partners to strengthen local infrastructure, build resilience and enable people to shape the places they lives.

Our work spans community development, managing community facilities, providing workspace and delivering projects that support social action and community-led change. Through our physical asset base we self generate over 75% of our income.

Find out more at www.cavca.org.uk

About the author

Mel Bonney is Chief Executive of Coast and Vale Community Action (CaVCA), a long-established community organisation supporting coastal and rural communities across North Yorkshire. Based in Scarborough, Mel and the CaVCA team have developed a wide range of community-led initiatives focused on social infrastructure, youth provision, family support, community resilience and local systems change. Her work is rooted in the belief that communities already hold the relationships, insight and creativity needed for change, and that the role of systems is to enable community power to flourish.

Under her leadership, CaVCA is becoming recognised for its innovative, relationship-based approach to community development, including participation in the National Lottery Community Fund's pioneering Community Power programme and UKRI's Community Research Network.

Previously Mel led development trust Hastings Trust on the south coast and prior to that was Regeneration Programmes Manager at Hastings Borough Council. Mel began her community development career with Hull Developing Our Communities at the age of 25. Mel is a passionate advocate for place-based working, social justice and the power of trusted local relationships to strengthen resilience, belonging and hope.

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<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/funding-programmes/community-power>

Through this funding CaVCA is working locally in Scarborough to support residents to:

- Understand and influence systems
- Develop practical solutions to local challenges
- Work collectively to create positive change

Our **Finding Our Voice** series was developed through UK Research and Innovation as part of the first phase (2022 to 2024), where UKRI funded 25 groups across the UK to establish partnerships and explore how local organisations, from across multiple sectors and scales, can make research and innovation relevant for their communities.

<https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/public-engagement/research-and-innovation-for-everyone/>

Our collaboration with **The People's Powerhouse's Coast to Coast** initiative links local conversations about trust, power and accountability (along with other themes) with the 'bigger picture' across the North of England.

<https://peoplespowerhouse.org.uk/our-community/coast-to-coast/>

The Long Term Plan for Towns Engagement and the Plan for Neighbourhoods Engagements, both commissioned by North Yorkshire Council, were undertaken to inform Scarborough's '**Pride in Place**'

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pride-in-place-strategy>

