

## ***Feeling Towns: Pride and Harefield***

### Partner Report for Southampton City Council

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#### **Executive Summary**

The *Feeling Towns* project, in collaboration with the Stronger Communities team at Southampton City Council, explored the meaning of pride in place in the Harefield ward of the City. Research was undertaken across summer 2022, when funders and policymakers put more political weight on evaluating pride in place. We spoke with approximately 100 people using a variety of research methods, including interviews, fieldwork, surveys and a facilitated creative workshop.

We found Harefield had a clearly understood identity and a strong sense of pride. We found that the source of this pride sometimes accorded with both national findings and community research in other very local areas: the community in Harefield was proud of its green spaces and its community places. (It has no cafes, pubs or community centres but it is proud of its fast food outlets.) Above all, Harefield is proud of its people and people are proud of their families. However, in other ways, we found that Harefield did **not** follow national or local patterns. Pride in Harefield is not associated with history, heritage, the wider city, or with community assets and organisations. Harefield feels geographically and culturally separated from the city, its culture and its history. Harefield keenly feels the loss of investment in its community assets. Residents are unable to identify with resources and services that they experience as only partially, or very conditionally, available (i.e. schools, colleges, Sure Start centre, GP surgeries, local councillors).

Our central recommendations concern providing Harefield with a champion that builds on the strong sense of identity and pride in place that exists in the ward. This work allows residents to begin developing community assets and to collectively engage with the wider city and its services. We specifically recommend strategies for increasing communication (both physical and digital); for developing capacities for local governance and civic upskilling (including increased presence from, and engagement with, elected representatives); for enhanced collaborations with schools and colleges; and for reanimating public spaces and events.

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#### **Introduction**

[\*Feeling Towns\*](#) is an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded knowledge exchange project led by the University of Southampton. It explores the role of place and identity in governance and local policy, paying close attention to the government's [Levelling Up](#) agenda, which identified “restoring pride in place” as one of its 12 guiding missions. We have brought together a community of practice from a range of sectors, communities and geographies to share knowledge and expertise to better understand the correlation between pride and place attachment—understood as the emotional bonds developed between people and place—and the health of local cultural ecologies. The project has four wider aims:

1. **To explore** collective methods and metrics for understanding pride

2. **To share** qualitative methods that challenge dominant econometric approaches to understanding the impacts of investment in culture and regeneration
3. **To cooperate** across multiple political and policy realms engaged in the Levelling Up agenda, sharing findings and influencing policy making
4. **To produce** new understandings of the complex roles that pride, place attachment and civic engagement play in local decision making

With our partners from Darlington Borough Council, Southampton City Council, Rural Media (Herefordshire) and Historic England, we developed a co-produced case study approach to address the specific needs of each organisation and place. We have conducted fieldwork and developed our creative methodologies with the communities who live, work and volunteer in these places.

Levelling Up was the flagship policy of Boris Johnson's post-Brexit UK government. It aimed to spread opportunity and prosperity to all regions of the UK, addressing regional imbalances in social mobility and people's life chances. [Some evidence](#) suggests that the allocation of funds has not matched the government rhetoric, and the future of Levelling Up in the current political climate is uncertain.

The purpose of this report is threefold: i. to articulate the specific challenges in Southampton that relate to identifying and measuring "pride in place"; ii. to summarise the project's activities in Southampton; iii. to present key themes, findings and recommendations.

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### **Challenges for Southampton**

While its city boundaries fall within the Greater Southeast geography, Southampton has significant areas of need and deprivation. [Council data](#) has highlighted key needs and challenges across the city.

Southampton City Council did not bid in the first round of the Levelling Up Fund (LUF) but took advantage of the subsequent round (LUF2) in 2022. The three LUF2 proposals—on Bargate regeneration, Bassett Outdoor Sports Centre improvement, and Itchen Riverside protection—seek to "[\[boost\] local spending, job creation, support for communities, and pride in the city](#)". Understanding pride more closely could support the Council's wider ambitions to improve the lives of residents across Southampton. The awards for LUF2, which is heavily oversubscribed, are expected by the end of 2022. [Ministers](#) in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities (DLUHC) insist that the fund will continue for its proposed duration despite the expectation public spending will be cut elsewhere.

Southampton's shortlisted City of Culture bid, [Southampton 2025](#), provoked further questions about the city's sense of place and identity. Relatedly, the Council's Cultural Strategy, [Southampton Together](#), outlined its vision that by 2031: "Through culture, Southampton [will be] an inclusive city that collaborates and connects at home and on the national and international stage to ignite **imaginings, innovation, pride and a sense of belonging** across the whole city." In this vein, pride is often seen as a key driver for cultural regeneration and social cohesion.

In this context, our project sought to explore methodologies for community consultation on place attachment and civic engagement. We advised on the Council's LUF2 bid, and trialled new, creative community engagement methods for exploring residents' understanding of pride in place. We have drawn on previous work about civic pride in Southampton, led by [The Caravan Gallery and Solent Showcase](#), activities from the [UK City of Culture bid](#), and the Council's need to articulate a city-wide identity and "levelling up narrative" (Council Officer, 2022). Discussions with the Stronger Communities Team identified the Harefield ward, an area that has [mixed indicators of deprivation](#) and is understood as feeling "overlooked" by the Council. We collaborated with the Council's Stronger Communities Team and stakeholders including SO18 Big Local to develop a mixed methods approach involving an online survey and in-person, qualitative research devised and facilitated by our research team.

At the Love Where You Live (LWYL) community event, the Council distributed an online link as well as a paper version of this survey to attendees. From the 31 responses, out of an estimated 500 people who attended the event, Harefield residents appeared to prioritise improving health services, tackling crime and anti-social behaviour, and having access to more sports and fitness opportunities. Some residents felt that the area had declined in the last ten years, mostly due to the perception that criminal behaviour was increasing and that the police tended not to address it. **Threaded across these priorities was the desire for further provision for children and young people.** As one survey respondent put it, "Harefield desperately needs more activities for youths." Suggestions included youth clubs, graffiti walls, community art projects, a community centre (it was noted that the previous one had been "closed for a very long time and abandoned"), safe spaces for children, skate raps, football nets, orienteering, forestry schools and woodwork clubs.

A majority of survey respondents wanted more bins and benches installed, and some asked for future opportunities to pick litter and plant wildflowers. Seven participants thought that developing a "Friends of Harefield" group would be a helpful way to improve green spaces. Having consulted with the Stronger Communities Team and SO18 Big Local, there appears to be a disconnect between what residents claim to want and what services they will use or are willing to be involved in. Some survey respondents asked for arts and crafts sessions, as well as exercise provision: these types of activities have been advertised in the area in the past but with little take-up. It may be the case that **some Harefield residents are interested in using community services but do not have the confidence and agency to take part.** More research is required to understand this discrepancy.

Several survey respondents requested more food banks and food charity provision in the area. This point was surprising for community organisers because there is a Fareshare mobile larder situated at Harefield Primary School as well as a nearby larder at Thornhill Baptist Church. It is unclear as to whether a "community fridge" still runs out of Woodlands College. A more up-to-date hyper-local asset and service mapping of Harefield would be useful for the Council, for community groups and for residents. Because of the lack of community consultation on the Fareshare site, residents may feel a lack of ownership over the service and feel that it is not 'for them'. Our research shows that **even when services are physically accessible, residents are less likely to use them if they have little stake in the process.**

There were key differences in the priorities of Council tenants and homeowners in Harefield. While both sets of residents valued the importance of health and sports, Council tenants were more likely to prioritise the importance of food and mental health provision.

Homeowners valued education, which was the least important priority for Council tenants. From our qualitative research, residents' views on education often have roots in their own school experiences. It is important that Harefield Primary School and Woodlands College demonstrate a clear offer of their services to the local community. **The schools are key potential assets in Harefield**, where there are very few other shared spaces and hubs for community organising and collective endeavours.

Responding to these challenges, we formulated the following research questions:

1. **What languages and vocabularies can understand pride in place in Harefield?**
2. **How do Harefield residents imagine the future of their community?**
3. **Can residents get involved in the process of changing their community?**

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## **Research Methods**

Methods included desk research and informal, online interviews with senior officers from across the Council, as well as city leaders and stakeholders. Fieldwork was conducted during the Stronger Communities' event in Harefield (18/08/2022) and a creatively facilitated workshop (09/09/2022).

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## **Key Themes and Findings**

### Heritage and Green Spaces

- We found no responses that related pride to the history and heritage of the city or the local area.
- Pride was associated with local green spaces, nature, and "wild" animals, especially foxes and deer. This point was confirmed by the popularity of the Potting and Grow Your Own stall at the LWYL event.

### Community Spaces and Services

- A deficit of traditional community assets in the Harefield area was often commented upon. The Harefield Community Centre in Yeovil Chase was mentioned several times, with a recurring concern relating to incomplete and fragmented community knowledge about the ownership and the future of the building. The lack of a pub was noted as a "loss" by some, though viewed by others as a positive development, associating pubs with antisocial behaviour.
- Provisions for young people are scant, other than a scout hut on the ward periphery. This point was often noted by residents, and when asked what changes people would like to see in the area, "a youth club" or "somewhere for the young people to go" were frequent responses. Other related concerns included the need for repairs to broken or missing play equipment in the green spaces.
- Communal spaces that were associated with pride include the Harefield Fish Bar and Full House Chinese Takeaway. When participants were asked for analogies for

Harefield in our creative workshop, Harefield was compared to a roast dinner, underlining the importance of food to the sense of community.

- There were very few positive comments about the local schools, nor any suggestion that the schools might be drivers of a sense of community.
- Other community assets were not identified as such. There was little recognition of a shared Sure Start centre in Townhill Park and others reported only the increased difficulties of obtaining a GP appointment.

### Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour

- Several respondents reported concerns about anti-social behaviour, including speeding and Harefield as a specific route for stolen motorbikes. One respondent thought that Harefield is the only area in Southampton without speed bumps.
- One respondent related an incident of young people verbally abusing the disabled and elderly. There are concerns about fly-tipping, double-parking, and drug dealing. While reducing crime is a priority for some residents in Harefield, others reported a distrust of the police.

### Community Feelings and Relationships

- The term pride itself is not an obvious one for the community: many participants did not understand the phrase “pride in place” or “civic pride” and often thought we were asking them about LGBTQ+ pride (about which they were generally very positive).
- The sense of community in Harefield was reported by many as having been stronger in the past. Yet, though many residents had opinions about what could be improved in the area and despite the lack of community assets, there was a strong sense of local pride. This sense often arose through positive expressions of “the people.”
- When asked to draw a timeline of events of which they were most proud, related to living in Harefield, one resident pinpointed the birth of their children and the date of their marriage. For them, and for others we spoke with, Harefield was associated primarily with their own family.
- Pride appeared to be hyper-local, often related to specific streets within the Harefield area. One resident who listed numerous problems she felt existed within the locale, finished her testimony by pounding her fist to her chest and declaring: “I’m Harefield through and through.”
- There was little to no evidence of residents having pride in Southampton. Indeed, the people we spoke with felt Harefield was detached from and had—at best—mixed views of the city as a whole.

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### **Analysis and Recommendations**

There exist often difficult, sometimes competing, questions about Southampton’s identity, culture, topography, economy, health outcomes and social disparities. Pride itself, our *Feeling Towns* research suggests, is complex and impossible to conclusively pin down.

Nevertheless, our fieldwork suggests that in Harefield pride is associated with a positive sense of place, belonging and with a relational experience of community. Residents understand pride as being about their relationships to their family, to their neighbours and to their imagined—and very clearly defined—Harefield community. In Harefield, there was a sense of pride in place, often based in opposition to the wider city.



Local memory and local identity were specifically important to Harefield, whereas heritage narratives and histories were less evident. This point is in contrast with our other case studies, which show that there is often a less clear sense of the boundary between independent wards and wider towns and cities, and which indicate stronger feelings of ownership over, and consequently affection towards, heritage buildings and narratives.

In Harefield, the loss or absence of such assets is often presented as a kind of communal *wound*. This *wound* is framed particularly through the experience of young people, with residents identifying that **more services and spaces dedicated to this group would significantly benefit the area**. Residents also recognise that **these services and spaces could simultaneously address the growing problem of antisocial behaviour**. Many in the community have an emotional investment in recovering community spaces such as the Harefield Community Centre and the adjacent youth club in Yeovil Chase. They would be also keen to see a pub, restaurant or cafe open.

That said, we did not encounter any active campaigns, campaigners or community-led plans to drive change (though we are aware of a somewhat successful campaign on bus routes and frequency). Indeed, there was some resistance to getting involved collectively in these sorts of activities. One participant dismissed the notion of “community” altogether. Such responses do not necessarily mean that these individuals do not care about the local area. Solutions to concerns are clearly articulated, such as **installing speed bumps** and the **coordination of disabled access to attend events** such as LWYL. However, we suggest that there is an embedded local culture where community participation and collective action is viewed negatively. Further, such a culture is related by some participants to the dominance of one or two larger families, who through everyday encounters (by being at the school gates, for example) act as arbiters of what is or is not appropriate behaviour in Harefield.

**Further research is needed to more fully understand this aspect of local culture and the resistance to collective action, which may be a symptom of the wider challenge to council-led plans identified earlier in the report.**

We also make the following **recommendations**:

#### **Improving communication:**

We have noted problems of miscommunication between service providers, including the Council, schools, and the community, though it is not always clear why this breakdown is happening. **Harefield needs a champion**. We advocate for the Stronger Communities Team to have a continued role in articulating the needs of Harefield to Council Directorates.

Organisations such as Sure Start would benefit from more visibility and effective promotion, but community members were unaware of where to look for this kind of information. In some cases, residents turn to their family or neighbours for information, though they may be equally uninformed. A free newspaper and sustained digital engagement with residents are effective conduits for communication. At the very least, a local and public space, accessible to all, is needed where the community can find out basic information and where advisory services might be based.

The SO18 Big Local partly provides this service, but the programme and funding stream is due to end in 2024, so a future-proof solution is urgently needed. There may be off-shoot groups with enough local interest, and there is Partners' Action Group that meets regularly. The localities event in Woodlands College was well attended by stakeholders and there is the possibility of Youth Options funding in the area. The SO18 Big Local hub may be taken over by the Oasis Academy, which offers services such as a community pantry and a youth bus. It is a faith-based initiative, which may prove an obstacle for some residents who deem it to be inaccessible.

For some residents, the SO18 Big Local space is considered "small" and therefore inadequate. Despite having a relatively long history in the area, after eight-and-a-half years, the SO18 Big Local had not held an event in Harefield like LWYL before the summer of 2022. It is worth learning from the SO18 Big Local experience, acknowledging mistakes and successes. A useful output would be an evaluation of the needs of local community groups such as SO18 Big Local for the benefit of future projects. Locality events for healthcare services, public transport and schools may provide opportunities for such evaluation.

#### **Improving local governance and civic upskilling:**

Some respondents were not convinced that local democracy is working as effectively as it might: ward councillors, and particularly the local MP, were considered too absent by some. Councillors and services could deploy digital means to contact residents in Harefield. Neighbourhood Whatsapp and Facebook groups can be an effective way to develop awareness of local issues and supply information to residents. While this action does not address digital and literacy barriers, it does provide a way of engaging with a significant proportion of the community.

Harefield should not be treated as a problem to be solved. Beyond the efforts of the SO18 Big Local, it is unclear who is championing the area and we report significant weaknesses in connected leadership. Only one of the local Councillors, Valerie Laurent, attended the LWYL event. Community and Council relations might be improved if ward Councillors were more active (and visibly so) in addressing the needs of the community.

Creative and participatory projects can be devised to understand how *common knowledge* is circulated locally, including strategies to dispel local myths and misinformation. This work could develop basic citizenship skills, such as team-work, communication and confidence. Events like LWYL might consider developing these skills and abilities with the community in partnership with local schools, the university and other stakeholders including creative organisations and private businesses, who should be encouraged to contribute money and resources. **Place-based leadership skills**, such as running meetings, defining aims and understanding stakeholder needs, are essential. The Council should look to support community organisations to sustain Community Interest Companies and Community Trusts.

**A programme of civic engagement** is needed that addresses participation in Harefield. Why do they keep returning elected members who they feel do not represent them? Residents could be consulted on boundary changes and the subsequent decisions clearly communicated to the community. The Housing team, for instance, has existing communication routes to Council tenants. These routes should be utilised.

**Improving relationships with local schools:**

Many residents' (including parents) relationship to Harefield Primary School and Woodlands Community College are narrowly conceived. It is often based on the degree to which the teachers and management have (or have not) disciplined their children. In comparison with our other case studies, the local schools do not appear to be as central to community life and activity. Can activities be developed to encourage the community to view the schools differently? Could the schools become hubs for community activities? To engage with schools, it may be useful to draw on [resources](#) emerging from the Sheffield Hallam Civic Universities Network, which is developing a focus on schools and colleges.

**Reanimating public spaces, celebrating creativity, addressing anti-social behaviour:**

Many residents understand the effectiveness of pre-emptive solutions to anti-social behaviour. They desire interventions such as improved services and facilities for young people. A solution might be to develop a festival, or a high-profile programme of activities, in partnership with the Council, the University and UK City of Culture 2025 stakeholders. This programme could be based around the area's green spaces, which we identified as a key part of Harefield's identity and a source of collective pride. It could include the local schools, drawing inspiration from [The Big Malarkey Festival](#). Such initiatives would create valuable opportunities to develop volunteering skills and capacities, developing on learnings from the [Hull2017 Volunteer Programme](#). Another programme of events might be developed to reflect on the 'hidden histories' of Harefield and its multi-generational community. Sharing celebrations of heritage and understanding the long, complicated histories of places can improve residents' place attachment and [sense of wellbeing](#).

With very simple software such as [Story Maps](#), a community-based project in Harefield could include the creation of a heritage trail. Such an initiative could also address some of the city-centre bias of the Council, which is a source of frustration for many residents. In principle, we advocate a mixed methods approach. Community organisers claimed that residents did not talk about anti-social behaviour at the LWYL event because some of the perpetrators were nearby and in earshot. Working more closely with the police, including street-level engagement and coordination with other Council departments, will benefit conversations with residents.

We suggest that a community-run cafe should be encouraged in Harefield to redress the lack of shared social and service spaces. This initiative could draw inspiration from various sources, including [Home Baked](#) and [Granby Four Streets](#). It must be noted that these examples are sustained by significant quantities of cultural, social and educational capital, which would likely need to be developed in Harefield. An ambitious, long-term programme of community skills and training would transform the area. Thus, a key aim for the Council and stakeholders should be to develop a robust strategy to encourage and support community ownership. This strategy might involve developing relevant training schemes to build community project development and bidding capacity, as well as working with communities to research and develop links with funders such as charities and the local universities.

**Data sharing:**

We note there is a lack of qualitative analysis of the data available on the Southampton Data Observatory to support these recommendations. We suggest a joint bid to fund a pilot case



study page on the Observatory website, which would bring together narratives and histories of Harefield to complement the existing quantitative datasets. We further endorse the creation of a report depository that allows local residents, organisations and stakeholders to network and discuss challenges in Harefield. This work will help to make the long-term data from the Stronger Communities Team available and useful for the Council as a whole. We note there has been a low number of Safe City responses in Harefield: a depository will allow for incremental data from Harefield to supplement the main dataset.

Poor understanding about local wards and communities is a city-wide issue. For instance, “Harefield” can be variously understood: as part of the SO18 postcode; as a political ward that includes the east of Bitterne and the south of Midanbury; as demarcations of the Harefield residential estate; and as specific locations, such as Bentley Green and its surrounding roads. The most coherently understood geography may vary depending on who you are speaking with. Harefield offers a wider illustration for the importance of understanding hyper-local characteristics and needs across the city. The Harefield estate is at least within Harefield ward; Midanbury and Townhill Park, for instance, straddle ward boundaries. LSOA maps offer a solution to understanding areas within areas, but these still efface the lived experiences of residents and unique local geographies. It is thus crucial to design place-based interventions in Harefield that make sense to residents.

We finally advise providing training for engagement officers in creative methodologies to improve community consultation. These methods can be developed to track residents’ views across a long period. The breakdown in relationships between residents and the Council develops over time and should be addressed as such. There is a long prehistory to some negative feelings in Harefield, including the closure of the Community Centre, the reduction of youth provisions, and the withdrawal of public transport routes, all of which cannot be simply dismissed as complaining for the sake of it.

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#### **APPENDIX:**

The *Feeling Towns* team would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this report:

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All Harefield residents who spoke with us at the Love Where You Live event (18/09/2022) and participants of the follow-up poetry workshop (09/09/2022).