

A photograph of three women gathered around a table, looking at a document. The image is overlaid with a blue tint. The woman on the left is smiling and looking towards the center. The woman in the middle is wearing glasses and looking down at the document. The woman on the right is also wearing glasses and looking at the document.

**Local Trust**  
trusting  
local  
people

# Trusting local people:

Putting real power in the  
hands of communities

February 2023

# Local Trust

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who helped to inform the research and writing of this report. This included taking the time to share expertise on the topic of community and neighbourhood governance, and to review earlier versions of the content of the report. We hope that our collective work can support efforts to reform community and neighbourhood governance in ways that make areas better places to live and improve residents' prospects.

## About this report

This report is designed to inform the government's review of neighbourhood governance models, a measure included as part of the Levelling Up White Paper. It reviews the evidence on existing mechanisms – parish or town councils and neighbourhood forums – before proposing a new strategic framework for neighbourhood governance that would unlock community leadership and help to improve the most deprived and 'left behind' neighbourhoods in England.

## About Big Local

The Big Local programme has invested £1.15m in funding from the National Lottery Community Fund into 150 neighbourhoods across the country. This funding has been placed directly in the hands of local residents, giving them the ability to make decisions about how to improve their areas and the quality of life of local people.

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A flag-making workshop at Boston Big Local.  
Photo: Zute Lightfoot/Local Trust



[www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk](http://www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk)

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# Foreword

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The Levelling Up White Paper published last year set out a vision to address economic disparities and to level up the most deprived or 'left behind' parts of the UK. At its core, it is a programme to devolve power to local leaders. Largely, this programme is rooted in traditional forms of devolution, with a commitment to handing power and resources to local authorities, metro mayors and regional leaders. But the White Paper also contains proposals to shift power to communities, at the neighbourhood level, as part of its commitment to build the social capital, relationships and civic pride that are needed to underpin levelling up.

The White Paper promised "a bold new approach to community empowerment" and commits government to a programme of work, with civil society, to make it a reality. This report emphasises the value and importance of 'double devolution' in bringing this about – a shift of power from national and local government to communities themselves. It also discusses the policy measures needed – in the form of investment and support – to enable the residents of the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods to both benefit from, and participate fully, in this shift. It advocates for a Community Wealth Fund and for other measures to build local leadership and community capacity. Without these, these communities are likely to be excluded from the benefits of this change. We know this is not the government's intention.

The White Paper proposed a review of community or neighbourhood governance and the piloting of community partnership mechanisms. Officials have acknowledged that the measures are skeletal; they need to be worked up. This report aims to inform this work: it surveys existing mechanisms,

sets out the principles which should underpin change, and recommends a new framework for a devolved approach to the community-led governance of a local area.

There is support for community devolution across the political spectrum. The leader of the Labour Party, Keir Starmer, has stressed their commitment to greater devolution, ensuring that "local people are in charge of the resources – and the opportunities – to improve their own communities. If elected Labour has committed to a Take Back Control Bill to secure "a new approach to politics and democracy... which trusts communities with the power to control their destiny".

This report has been in gestation for a couple of years. Its roots lie in conversations with community leaders helping to deliver the Big Local programme about the policy issues that most affect them and the change they would most like to see. The common theme in all of these discussions was the difficulty of achieving positive change in deprived neighbourhoods because of 'red tape', the lack of accessible processes and mechanisms for securing

genuine influence over the issues that are most important to communities, and – in some instances – the stance and priorities of local government. We need to create the conditions in which every community across the country has the opportunity to thrive; strong and effective community governance in the most deprived or ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods, would make a crucial contribution. We hope this report provides a useful steer.

**Matt Leach**

Chief Executive  
Local Trust

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# Executive summary

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The issue of how to promote, support and sustain effective community or neighbourhood governance is one that has vexed policy makers for decades. There have been various attempts to 'empower' communities, most notably a raft of localism measures introduced just over ten years ago, but they have failed to fulfil their potential. This report considers why this is the case – in particular, why these measures have failed to have an impact or make the difference needed in the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

One of the report's most important messages is that reforms to community or neighbourhood governance should be judged principally on their success in making areas better places to live and improving resident's prospects. Where new approaches are successful in effectively engaging, representing and giving decision-making power to residents, this can provide the foundations of a wider growth in local civic activity and political engagement – building civic pride, addressing alienation from our political system, and improving outcomes.

Such an approach, which builds on the knowledge, skills and passions of local residents, is of particular value in transforming the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods. The evidence is that these areas – whose long-standing challenges have proven intractable in the past – start to improve when residents have power over the local decisions that most affect them and, in some instances, hold budgetary responsibility as part of a long-term strategy to rebuild local civic institutions and, in so doing, increase levels of social capital.

## **A two-tier system**

Statutory structures, like parish councils and neighbourhood forums, are important and valuable local government mechanisms. As this report shows, they have great potential to deliver enhanced community value. However, the most deprived areas of the country tend to be unparished and also lack neighbourhood forums. To be created and to function effectively, such mechanisms require a level of pre-existing social infrastructure that, by definition, is depleted or absent in 'left behind' neighbourhoods (see Box 1).

This report demonstrates that there is by default a two-tier system for community or neighbourhood governance. The 'left behind' neighbourhoods that need power and agency the most, and for whom it would make most difference are the least well served by the current system. By contrast, the areas with the most social infrastructure, highest levels of social capital and access to resources are best able to navigate the system and ensure it works for them.

The community leaders involved in delivering Big Local tell us that they lack knowledge and understanding of statutory mechanisms and processes. When they have to engage with them, in order to progress community projects, they find them frustratingly slow and bureaucratic, process-heavy and often lacking sensitivity to the needs and aspirations of local people.

These community leaders generally have jobs and families. Their view is that they do not have time to 'waste' on bureaucratic processes that may go nowhere or which

do not address the issues that matter most to them. They want to establish and engage in processes that make a real difference, processes which are transparent, proportionate and genuinely engaging. This report argues that to achieve the change required, three main things are needed:

- investment in social infrastructure;
- the building of residents' capacity to improve their areas;
- a meaningful transfer of resources and power to local communities.

## Box 1: Definitions

### 'Left behind' neighbourhoods

In 2019, Local Trust commissioned research from Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI). This developed a new Community Needs Index (CNI), which mapped spaces and places to meet, community organisations and community engagement, and physical and digital connectivity. The research identified 225 wards which were both in the worst 10 per cent on this new index and on the Index of Multiple Deprivation, suggesting these wards are the most 'left behind' neighbourhoods in England (Local Trust, 2019). See box 5 for more detail on the methodology for identifying 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

### Social infrastructure

Social infrastructure supports the development of bonding and bridging social capital. It comprises the spaces and places (such as community centres, parks, pubs and recreation centres) in which people meet and form social ties, the community organisations and activities which bring them together, and the transport provision and access to digital which provides them with access to opportunities outside their immediate area.

## Invest in social infrastructure

There is a need for investment in the social fabric and social infrastructure of the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods to enable their residents to participate in civic life. The sense that those living in these neighbourhoods have of being cut off and ignored means they need support to rebuild their social capital.

Our experience of running the Big Local programme indicates that what starts to turn the tide in these areas over time is the gradual creation – driven by residents – of a strong ecology of local community institutions which give people responsibility and power. We have witnessed how a relatively small investment per head of population per annum has created vibrant civic activity in areas in which it was previously absent.

This pump-priming creates a virtuous circle. One community activity generates many more, as the people engaged grow confident in their ability to organise and lead, and as conversations generate greater awareness of community needs and aspirations. The way to revitalise an area and to make its residents powerful is to support such community action.

The government's devolution plans, as set out in the White Paper, are unlikely to level up the most deprived or 'left behind'

neighbourhoods unless they acknowledge the latent power and assets already found in communities – their skills, knowledge, resourcefulness, and their passion and commitment to create positive change. Supporting the development of community action – the rewearing of the social fabric in a neighbourhood in which it has frayed – is perhaps the only sure foundation for positive, sustainable and transformational socio-economic change.

### **Recommendation 1: Investing in social infrastructure**

Government should dedicate a share of dormant assets to a Community Wealth Fund (CWF), in order to provide the necessary long-term (10-15 year) investment in developing community-led social infrastructure in the 225 most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods across England. The recent consultation on dormant assets included whether a new expanded dormant assets scheme might be used to establish such a Fund.

You can find more information about the CWF by visiting:  
<http://communitywealthfund.org>.

### **Support residents to improve their neighbourhoods**

Learning from Big Local areas is that confidence and capacity-building work in addition to funding is crucial (see Box 2). Ten years into what is a 15-year programme we have witnessed how, as communities grow in confidence and capacity, they are willing and able to address bigger and more intractable issues like low levels of economic activity in their neighbourhoods. They are also better positioned to partner with the public sector in more responsive service delivery based on deep local knowledge.

Big Local demonstrates that a genuine transfer of power to communities is possible. Partnership boards in 150 neighbourhoods, with over 50 per cent representation of local residents, have taken responsibility for spending £1.2 million each over 10–15 years to improve their areas. The programme shows the appetite the residents of the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods have to improve their neighbourhoods through arrangements which are focused on achieving outcomes and which are flexible and light on bureaucracy. It models the potential of a new form of community or neighbourhood governance to rebuild local civic institutions and potentially create the foundations for longer-term formal governance structures to be established.

## Recommendation 2: Supporting capacity-building

A new Network for Communities (NfC), modelled on the New Schools Network (now closed) which supported parents establishing free schools, should be established to work alongside the CWF to provide advice, support and mentoring to funded communities. This recommendation also builds on the learning from Big Local, which provided the resident-led partnerships delivering the programme with targeted support to build their confidence and capacity. This was tailored to the needs and interests of local people and their priorities. It included ongoing peer support and has enabled residents to deliver on their plans and enact change in their areas.

More information about the NfC proposal is available in this report: [publicfirst.co.uk/a-network-for-communities-building-the-capacity-for-change-in-left-behind-neighbourhoods.html](http://publicfirst.co.uk/a-network-for-communities-building-the-capacity-for-change-in-left-behind-neighbourhoods.html)

## Box 2: Resident-led community governance

Big Local is a model in which resources, decisions and change-making are led by partnerships of local people in parallel with, and complementary, to statutory community governance mechanisms, such as parish and town councils. The programme builds the confidence and capacity of residents, providing the foundations for rebuilding social capital and local civic institutions.

There are also a range of 'community anchors' – multi-purpose community organisations which seek to serve the needs of the residents of a particular place. These are supporting communities across England to improve both their area and residents' quality of life.

While these groups lack the powers of groups with a statutory basis – parish or town councils or neighbourhood forums – at their best they are inclusive, engaging and rooted in lived experience and they are contributing significantly to civic life and the strength and resilience of their communities.

### **Make neighbourhood governance accessible to deprived communities**

The community leaders involved in delivering the Big Local programme on the ground tell us that they find statutory community governance structures like parish and town councils and neighbourhood forums generally both too limited in scope and too turgid. Their feedback is that we need a new more

impactful, simpler and engaging system. Such a system might be based on set principles, with certain core requirements for example, on community consultation and research and accountability with compliance assessed by the local authority. It should be adaptive and not impose a set bureaucratic and restrictive model on every area: otherwise, the participation costs will always be too high for deprived communities.

The underpinning principles of the new system should be:

- **Participation:** devolution of decision-making responsibility to the lowest geographical level possible;
- **Community-led:** a transfer of power to communities, enabling them to improve their neighbourhoods and residents' prospects;
- **Supporting people:** investment in capacity-building;
- **Neighbourhood funding:** budget responsibility;
- **Reducing red tape:** a simple, easy-to-understand, governance system with the lowest possible level of bureaucracy.

The proposed reform would have two main planks:

- reforming parish and town councils and supporting them to effectively use wide powers to improve their local areas;

- where such councils and forums do not exist, enabling strong and accountable community organisations – community partners – to take on this role.

Rather than imposing particular approaches on neighbourhoods, we believe that the imperative should be to build on the strongest, most effective, structures that already exist. The approach we propose echoes recommendations from *We're Right Here*, a campaign driven by community leaders and supported by nine national organisations including Local Trust (see Box 3).

In the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods where there are no strong civic organisations which could take on the role of community partner, residents should be supported by the CWF and NfC to establish community groups, which would eventually be capable of incorporating in their own right and taking on this function.

### Recommendation 3: Strengthening formal neighbourhood governance structures

The role of parish and town councils and neighbourhood forums should be promoted and developed and they should be supported to become more inclusive and engaging to enable them to play a fuller role in improving both their areas and socio-economic outcomes for their residents.

### Recommendation 4: Community partners nominated by residents

Residents of areas that are not parished and lack neighbourhood forums should be consulted and should nominate the strongest and most effective community anchor organisation in the neighbourhood to be their community partner.

### Recommendation 5: Powers for community partners

Community partners that satisfy the assessment criteria should have the same powers as parish and town councils and neighbourhood forums, including the ability to provide services and to benefit from local taxation and the neighbourhood portion of the levy on development.

### Box 3: We're Right Here

*We're Right Here* is a national campaign to shift power to communities, so that local people can shape the places where they live. The campaign is driven by six community leaders as well as Power to Change, The Cares Family, New Local, Locality, the Young Foundation, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Local Trust, People's Health Trust, and Friends Provident Foundation.

You can see the full proposal on the website: [right-here.org](http://right-here.org).

### Transfer resources and power to communities

Unlocking the latent power in local places – the skills, capabilities and resources already present – requires shifting the dial in how the public sector and communities relate to one another. It necessitates a transition to what New Local (2019) call the 'community paradigm': placing the design and delivery of public services in the hands of the communities they serve, and, by so doing, creating the conditions for transformational change.

We need a reset in the relationships local authorities have with their residents, particularly the most deprived or 'left behind'. Local authority budgets have been significantly reduced over recent years. In many areas, this has resulted in cuts in grants for community projects and community development efforts. However, this report makes an 'invest to save' argument. It suggests that relatively small investments in community-level activity and the development of preventative services helps to manage demand for public services and saves money over the medium to long term.

Some local authorities have already started to model an approach which is enabling and facilitative, and are supporting the development of strong communities. This is sorely needed in the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods. Others are behind the curve and we do not underestimate the extent of the cultural shift needed. Local authorities, with all the pressures on them, are unlikely to change without having an imperative to do so and they need appropriate support.

The Big Local programme demonstrates what communities in deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods can achieve if given a relatively small annual budget to improve their areas. It shows the power of delegating funding to local communities to engage in project planning and delivery – the services and facilities that result are tailored to local need and tend to achieve greater traction and better outcomes. More funding, particularly aimed at levelling up, such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, should be delegated to local communities in this way. Community partners – once recognised as demonstrating appropriate accountability, transparency and community engagement by the local authority – could provide the distribution mechanism.

### **Recommendation 6: A Community Power Act**

The government should bring forward a new Community Power Act, or include relevant provisions in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill currently progressing through parliament, placing a duty on local authorities to support the building of stronger communities and to delegate decision-making responsibility and budgets to the most local level possible.

### **Recommendation 7: Support for local authorities**

Local authorities should be provided with training and capacity building in order to make the necessary change. This will require significant investment.

### **Recommendation 8: Delegate national funds to neighbourhood level**

Government funds aimed at achieving levelling up, such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), should be delegated to community partners to ensure that they reach deprived neighbourhoods.

If government agrees to make the changes we recommend, we believe the prize would be great. Our experience, and the OSCI research (Box 5), suggests that supporting the development of community engagement and civic institutions in the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods would improve health, employment prospects, educational attainment and participation in higher education. Research by Frontier Economics (2021) also illustrates that, over the medium term, such support would be likely to repay the investment made more than three times over, both in improved outcomes and a reduced call on public services and public funds. And, by trusting local people and giving them back

control, making it much more attractive and feasible for them to engage in community governance, it would lead to a new flowering in British civic life – in the clubs, societies, volunteer-led institutions and community activities that make such a difference to people. It could transform how local people feel about their area and their prospects.

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# Introduction

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Power, wealth and opportunity are hoarded far away from the places where people live their everyday lives. The majority of decisions that affect people are made in Whitehall, debated in Westminster and rolled out from London. Local people are given little or no option to influence decisions. Even when power is devolved, it is to the governments of the nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland or to large areas of England such as Greater Manchester, the West Midlands or West Yorkshire.


In its 2019 manifesto, the Conservative Party (2019: 29) stated that it would ensure that “every part of our country has the power to shape its own destiny”. The over-centralisation of the UK is one of the areas addressed in the government’s Levelling Up White Paper (DLUHC, 2022). It offers “a new framework [that] will extend, deepen and simplify local devolution in England”. It is clear that devolution of power, decision-making and funding is a key pillar of government’s levelling up agenda.

## Empowering communities

The White Paper stresses the vital importance of devolution. It emphasises the success of ‘metro mayors’. It contains plans to expand this mayoral system, with any area that wants one having the chance to implement and negotiate a devolution deal along the same lines.

While it majors on the devolution of powers through government structures, the White Paper also commits to the next logical step: empowering and emboldening people to take charge in the communities where they live. It says:

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 **This is not only about transferring power from central to local government. Power is also generated locally, by the voluntary collaboration of citizens and public servants taking responsibility for realising the changes they want to see.”**

(DLUHC, 2022: 215)

It indicates that such a shift is required in order “to deliver substantive and sustainable change, acknowledging that local places need the power to create and deliver solutions to local challenges. It promises a bold new approach to community empowerment” and commits government to a programme of work, with civil society, to make it a reality (DLUHC, 2022: 215). This includes a Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships, centred on four guiding principles: community power, building the evidence base, listening to communities, and engaging with the most disconnected communities.

## Reviewing neighbourhood governance

In the Levelling Up White Paper, government additionally commits to evaluating models of neighbourhood governance in order to make it easier for community groups to set and shape local priorities. The role of parish councils will be reviewed, making the process of establishing them quicker and easier. New models for community partnerships will be trialled, harnessing asset-based approaches to driving community improvement. This includes piloting 'community covenants', new agreements between councils, public bodies, and the communities they serve, formulated to drive ambition for change in their area and to share power and resources to achieve it.

In setting out an approach to devolution through the tiers of government that is both radical and implementable, the government has come a long way. The strong commitment expressed to go further and pilot measures testing 'double devolution' – devolution of decision-making responsibility from local government to communities – is a further stride forward and to be welcomed. We have seen the transformative effect of community power through the Big Local programme: this has provided £1.2 million each in National Lottery funding to 150 deprived communities across England to spend over 10–15 years to improve their neighbourhoods and their quality of life. Local Trust's role is to build confidence and capacity in these communities, both to help mobilise residents to tackle local issues and to influence the decisions made by the statutory and private sector that affect their neighbourhood (see Box 4 for further details).

The community or neighbourhood governance proposals contained in the White Paper are skeletal. This is understandable, as they are simply designed to provide a framework for further, more in-depth and detailed work. In this report, we reprise the case for community devolution and consider how it should be brought into effect. Our thinking is based on conversations with community members involved in delivering Big Local and our previous research and policy work. One of the key lessons that emerges is that levelling up will only be a success if it makes a difference to the prospects of the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods (see Boxes 4 and 5). And this can only come about through long-term investment in social infrastructure in these areas, including support for communities and for community leaders with the local knowledge, credibility and commitment to take responsibility to mobilise community decision-making at the neighbourhood level and take responsibility for budgets.

## About this report

Part 1 of this report considers existing neighbourhood governance mechanisms to inform the review that government promises in the White Paper, considering "how to make it easier for local people and community groups to come together, set local priorities and shape the future of their neighbourhoods" (DLUHC, 2022: 15).

This report also surveys the role of local government in supporting and facilitating community action at the neighbourhood level, a crucial consideration in what an effective new framework might look like. The community leaders delivering Big Local describe how their relationship with local government is the most important issue as they attempt to improve their area, a finding echoed in influential research on neighbourhood planning (Parker et al, 2020).

## Box 4: Big Local

The Big Local programme was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund in 2011. The 150 areas which benefit were chosen on the basis that they were amongst the 20 per cent most deprived in the country and had missed out on their share of lottery or other public funding. The hypothesis was that this was because they lacked civic assets in the form of individuals and organisations with the knowledge and experience to fundraise successfully.

In each of the 150 Big Local areas a partnership comprising a majority of local residents consults the local community, develops a plan of action, then steers and oversees its delivery. Each area has 10–15 years to spend the £1.2 million it has been awarded through the programme. Local Trust provides support in the form of ongoing mentoring, peer networking and specialist technical support.

Each Big Local partnership develops spending plans on the basis of extensive community research and consultation. Funding is released once it is demonstrated that plans are feasible and have broad community support.

One of the outcomes from Big Local investment is that partnership members feel equipped to influence the public sector, advocating on behalf of their community. In 2020, 71 per cent of partnership members reported that their Big Local was able to positively influence decision-making in their area, and 86 per cent reported having good working relationships with external partners (Local Trust, 2020c).

Big Local illustrates that giving a deprived community decision-making responsibility and a budget to improve their neighbourhood can be transformational: providing a focus for rebuilding social capital, generating strong community spirit and civic pride, and changing perceptions of areas for the better. The programme evaluation also indicates that, as the programme enters its last stages, Big Local areas have turned towards developing and implementing plans to leave a lasting legacy in their neighbourhoods, for example by setting up new organisations and securing premises and external funding (McCabe et al, 2020).

## Box 5: Identifying 'left behind' neighbourhoods

In 2019 Local Trust published *Left Behind? Understanding Communities on the Edge* which combined findings drawn from the Big Local programme with research commissioned from OCSI to map three different area characteristics in communities across England:

- civic assets – spaces and places for communities to meet, green space, and recreational opportunities;
- civic participation and community engagement – number of registered charities, voter turnout, etc; and
- physical and digital connectivity – travel times to key services, car ownership, and broadband speeds.

OCSI used these characteristics to create a new Community Needs Index (CNI).

Overlaying the worst 10 per cent of areas on the CNI over the 10 per cent of the most deprived areas in England (measured by the Index of Multiple Deprivation, IMD), highlighted 225 wards which were notable for being both highly deprived and lacking the social infrastructure to support local people to address local issues (Local Trust, 2019: 14). These wards have worse socio-economic outcomes than other equally deprived areas (those in the top 10 per cent most deprived). They have: worse educational attainment; lower participation in higher education; fewer job opportunities, with those that were available often being in low-paid employment; and significantly worse health outcomes, with lung cancer prevalence over double the national average (Local Trust, 2020a).

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# The devolution consensus

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Over the last few years a number of influential organisations have made increasingly urgent calls for greater devolution, including the British Academy (2017), Local Government Association (LGA) (2021a) and the APPG for Devolution (2021).

The arguments are now well rehearsed for benefits that include:

- strengthening democracy and accountability at the local level;
- achieving services that join up and mutually reinforce each other – siloed funding from Whitehall has worked against this;
- building long-term institutional capacity – short-term project funding has made this impossible;
- reducing economic inequality – fiscal decentralisation is regarded as a key contributor;
- drawing on the potential of local leadership – the pandemic demonstrated the power of flexible and tailored responses to local need;
- helping to address fractures in our society – by fostering increased trust in local government and other local institutions and a greater sense of local identity and civic pride.

The White Paper echoes some of these arguments. It acknowledges that local decision-making has tended to generate better local economic performance while centralised decision-making fails to build on local knowledge or cultivate local leadership. This means the capacity of key local institutions remains under-developed.

## Community devolution

Often commentary on devolution focuses on the importance and value of devolving power from central to local government. But there is a growing consensus, reflected in the White Paper, that this is insufficient: we also need to devolve power to the hyper-local level, directly to neighbourhoods. We need community devolution; we need to give communities greater power and control over the decisions that most impact their lives and their local areas.

The argument for community devolution or community leadership is simple. When local people are supported to take on the responsibility of improving their area, tangible benefits are delivered to community members (Local Trust, 2021a). Civic engagement strengthens people's sense of local identity, civic pride and community spirit. The services and activities prioritised and designed by residents are tailored to local needs and ambitions, making them more likely to be used and more effective. The area becomes a safer and nicer place to live, where people are more likely to know each other and to engage in acts of neighbourliness. Costs are lower due to local entrepreneurialism and resourcefulness, ensuring significant savings to the public purse over time (Local Trust, 2021a).

Numerous research studies and evaluations indicate that community leadership can help to solve complex structural problems and lead to better outcomes across a variety of domains, including local economic development, improving the prospects of young people, and community cohesion and resilience. The evidence is particularly well developed and striking for health and wellbeing. *The Marmot Review: Ten Years On* (Marmot et al, 2020: 98) shows a clear association between community leadership and improved health outcomes. Meaningful participation in civic life has also been found to act as a “stress buffer”, improving mental and physical health outcomes (People’s Health Trust, 2018: 3). And adopting this approach has resulted in considerable savings to the public purse (New Local, 2021: 76–81).

New Local (2021) argues that enabling and facilitating communities to take greater power and control of the services that affect them would bolster democratic legitimacy and faith in government, and help meet rising demand for services at a time of decreasing public resources. They recommend a new paradigm – a ‘community paradigm’. In a series of reports, they have explored the intellectual case for the approach, the evaluation evidence underpinning it, and also what it would look like when applied to particular service areas, for example employment and training (New Local, 2020; 2021). The conclusion is that this new community paradigm would enable and support a greater emphasis on prevention, reduce downstream costs, and contribute greatly to improved health and wellbeing (New Local, 2021).

## A ‘community moment’

Some refer to a ‘community moment’, or a new acknowledgement of the value and importance of community action, based on the impressive community mobilisation and surge in volunteering in response to the pandemic (Brett, 2022). This illustrated how effective community action can be: providing emergency support before the public sector was able to organise; reaching the most vulnerable, and those not on the radar of the state; providing support that was closely tailored to local need; and partnering across sectors to ensure the resources available were used to best effect (Local Trust, 2021b). It inspired the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson to ask Danny Kruger MP to produce a report considering how this community spirit and willingness to volunteer might be nurtured and sustained. Kruger’s (2020) report recommended breathing new life into community or neighbourhood governance and the piloting of community covenants (see Box 6). Indeed this analysis and the recommendations found their way into the Levelling Up White Paper (DLUHC, 2022).

The White Paper (DLUHC, 2022) suggests measures to devolve more power to communities and came hot on the heels of a paper on the theme, *Trusting the People*, by a group of Conservative MPs at the 2021 Conservative Party conference. That paper centres on the need to move from a passive, ‘rights’-based approach (rights to buy, rights to neighbourhood plans, rights to provide) to a proactive ‘do’ approach, where community power becomes the standard model and new normal (Baillie et al, 2021: 6).

This is not a party political issue. There is support for community devolution across the political spectrum. Keir Starmer (2021) has stressed the commitment of the Labour Party to greater devolution generally and to community devolution

in particular, describing a Labour vision “to deliver real devolution and real social justice. To ensure that local people are in charge of the resources – and the opportunities – to improve their own communities” (Starmer, 2021). Angela Rayner (2022) has reinforced this commitment, saying at the 2022 New Local conference that the “penny has finally dropped” for Labour on community power: the party now sees its importance, and if elected to govern would seek to redistribute power as well as resources.

While there is a consensus about the importance of developing stronger mechanisms for community governance and the value of devolving power to the neighbourhood level, there has been little consideration in government of what this means in practice. This report seeks to fill this gap, drawing in part on work undertaken by experts in the community sector and academia, by providing commentary on both the changes needed to enable greater community leadership and their implementation.

### Box 6: The role of community covenants

The relationships between community partners and local government, and perhaps the private sector, might be mapped out in ‘community covenants’. These are new mechanism which government plans to pilot to “help make local power a reality”. They are featured in the Levelling Up White Paper as a way of strengthening community power and achieving effective local cross-sector partnerships (DLUHC, 2022: 15). The proposal builds on the Localism Commission’s (2018: 26) call for a “new power partnership between local government and local people to unlock the potential of localism” and embed community involvement in local services.

The We’re Right Here Campaign argues that these community covenants could “be shaped flexibly to reflect the circumstances of the neighbourhood in question” but would have the overarching aim of allowing “local people to agree and implement neighbourhood-level power sharing and joint-working arrangements with councils and other bodies” (We’re Right Here Campaign Group, 2022: 27–28).

### Common challenges

Typically, there are three main challenges to community devolution (the devolution of responsibility and budgets from local authorities to local people).

Firstly, there is a view that only a very limited range of responsibilities would be appropriate for local residents to take on, such as rubbish bins, public seating, maintenance of green space, and representing the views of their communities, especially in the planning process. However, research demonstrates that some parish councils and neighbourhood forums have an

appetite to take on a much wider range of responsibilities in order to positively improve the communities that they serve (see Box 7 and Parker et al, 2015).

Furthermore, the Big Local programme illustrates that – with the right funding and capacity-building support – residents in some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England can develop and deliver plans to radically improve their areas through a broad range of services. Examples include community-based health and social care, provision for young people, employment and training services, tourism development, and enterprise support.

Secondly, there is concern about devolution of responsibilities and budgets to groups of residents that have not been formally elected by local citizens to represent them. This manifests itself in concern about accountability, potential capture by fringe groups or those with a malign intent, even the risk of fraud and abuse of funds.

However, it is possible to introduce appropriate checks and balances to ensure that this sort of capture does not occur; for example, requirements can be set around consultation, community research and engagement, with responsibility and funding ultimately only devolving to those groups that involve and have the support of all sections of the community. This is in addition to rigorously enforcing rules on political impartiality and conflict of interest. The assumption that fraud and abuse of funds are more likely if budgets are delegated to local people is a false one. Our experience of running the Big Local programme is that it is highly unlikely because of proximity – people would be defrauding their friends and neighbours and would become social pariahs.<sup>1</sup>

Another highly pragmatic argument is that the amounts of funding devolved to neighbourhoods would be relatively small in the scheme of things. The risk of loss or misuse of funds is heavily outweighed by the benefit accruing to the community in the increase in feelings of self-worth and agency engendered through community decision-making.

Some worry that only formally elected representatives in local government should have responsibility for deciding on local spending because they have a democratic mandate and can be held accountable through the ballot box. This might be regarded as a very weak form

of accountability. It could be argued that accountability is stronger, and levels of transparency greater, if those taking some local spending decisions are near neighbours; in comparison, local authority councillors and officers can seem remote and spread too thin.

A shift away from representative in favour of participatory democracy could perhaps be a remedy for the disease of high levels of scepticism about elected politicians and political processes. Voter turnout in the 2018 local elections was just 35 per cent, down from 36 per cent in 2014 and 43 per cent in 2010 (BBC, 2019), suggesting a long-term rise in apathy and a dissatisfaction with local democracy in its current form. In deprived areas or neighbourhoods that might be described as 'left behind' the statistics are even more striking, with just 25 per cent voting in the last local elections (OCSI, 2020). The Localism Commission found evidence that "a more dynamic understanding of accountability" grounded in community participation and decision-making would best address feelings of disconnection and disenfranchisement felt by many communities up and down the country (2018: 35). There is also evidence of an appetite for such engagement and a new community-powered approach to local area improvement, including in the most 'left behind' neighbourhoods (Survation, 2020).

Thirdly, there is concern that greater community power would undermine local government. However, increasingly local authorities themselves are seeking to find ways to engage and empower communities. Part of the motivation is cost saving, but there is also an imperative to improve outcomes by engaging or supporting local people to design and deliver services which better meet their needs and aspirations (see Annex).

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<sup>1</sup> Evidence shows very low rates of default for microfinance. This is because recipients are accountable to neighbours and friends, who they are aware have similar financial circumstances to their own (Ranabahu et al, 2018).

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# Part 1: A review of existing mechanisms and practice

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## Parish and town councils

The value of devolving decision-making power and responsibility to the neighbourhood level is not a new idea. Parish or town councils have been in place for nearly 200 years. In 2011, a raft of localism measures were introduced by the Coalition government in an attempt to breathe new life into these long-standing mechanisms for local democracy. Alongside these, other approaches such as neighbourhood planning were introduced, designed to give communities more control over what happens in their local area.

Unfortunately, the general assessment eleven years later is that these measures failed to rejuvenate neighbourhood governance in the way government had hoped. A particular issue had been low take-up in urban areas. In this chapter, we consider why this has been the case, based on feedback from community leaders in Big Local areas and other research.

## Powers and responsibilities

Parish councils may call themselves town or community or neighbourhood councils. There are some 10,000 across England. The National Association of Local Councils (NALC), which represents them, describes them as the “first tier of government” (NALC, 2019:4). This is because they are the closest tier of government to citizens, and therefore, in theory, the most accessible.

Parish councils provide a democratically accountable mechanism for bringing local people together to discuss local issues and create change. They have great potential, not least because they have access to funding through what is known as the ‘precept’. And, when a set of regulatory conditions is met, they enjoy ‘a general power of competence’, enabling them to work on a broad range of issues that impact on the lives of their communities – see Box 7 (Sandford, 2021: 13).

*(continued)*

## Box 7: Parish and town councils – responsibilities and financing

The General Power of Competence (GPC) was introduced by the Localism Act 2011. In simple terms, the GPC allows councils – including those parish and town councils that meet set criteria – to do anything that individuals can do, provided it is not prohibited by other legislation.

Parish and town councils are only eligible to exercise the GPC under certain conditions, including that at least two thirds of the total number of councillors have been elected not co-opted, and that the council's clerk has undertaken certified training (WALC, 2017). In practice, this means that not all can exercise a GPC, leaving some more able to affect change than others.

Generally, the work of parish councils is focused on local amenities: parks, public toilets, theatres and cinemas, car parks, war memorials, markets, litter bins, community centres, footpaths, fetes, tourism, traffic management, cemeteries, and lotteries.

More broadly, parish councils exercise a general consultative role on behalf of local people. For example, they have statutory consultation rights on local planning matters.

Parish and town councils can raise a 'precept' on the council tax bills produced by their billing authority (the unitary authority or district council). This is a demand for a sum to be collected through the council tax system which the billing authority cannot refuse to levy nor council taxpayers refuse to pay. In 2021, 8,876 of the 10,239 councils in England raised a precept. In 2018–19, the largest amount precepted by a parish council was £3.41 million, and the lowest received was £22.

## Potential

Over 270 parish or town councils have been created in the last 15 years (NALC, 2022). A further indicator of increased activity is the growth in the amount they receive to spend from local taxation (LGA, 2021b). This rose by more than 50 per cent in England between 2014/15 and 2020/21, an increase of £207 million (LGA, 2021b).

Parish councils can play an important role in place-making. Onward's (2021) Social Fabric Index found that local authorities which scored well in areas such as community assets, volunteering and group membership, the number of local businesses, and open and public space, tended to have higher levels of parish coverage than those local council areas which scored poorly.

When set up effectively, with strong representation from the local community, parish councils have the potential to generate and mobilise social capital. Darien (2012) shows that close and consistent contact with residents on local issues and events support growth in local trust and reciprocity. A well-established parish council acts as an anchor for community activity, supporting the development of ties and networks between local civic groups and organisations. And the more active a parish council, the stronger the bonds between residents and the local borough councillor, ensuring that the communities' interests are better represented at the next level of government (Darien, 2012).

Parish councils have the appetite to play a more significant role in improving

their local areas. A survey in 2016 established that while they tend to focus on recreation, public seats, litter bins, small community grants, bus shelters and allotments, they aspired to deliver a broader range of services. The top five were listed as: activities for older people; economic growth and business support; highways; traffic-calming measures; and

youth services and activities (NALC, 2016). NALC (2016), commenting on the survey results, argue that this points to councils' increasing interest in place-shaping and use of their local delivery role to improve outcomes in communities. Box 8 highlights examples of parish and town councils regarded as highly effective in delivering significant community benefit.

## **Box 8: Town and parish councils delivering significant community benefit**

### **Frome**

In 2015, a coalition of self-identified 'Independents' won all 17 seats on the town council, backed by a 70 per cent vote share. The politically diverse coalition has supported a large number of projects to support and strengthen the local community, for example, investing in the restoration of entertainment venues and purchasing land for 100 new allotments, therefore reducing the waiting list from 10 years to virtually none. They have also created Fair Frome which has spearheaded a programme of work to reduce poverty: supporting the local credit union, food banks, and organisations providing community housing. This has been enabled by a precept which totalled £1,802,305 in the 2021–22 financial year.

### **Durham**

Durham County has agreed a charter with its individual parish councils. Delegation in Durham has been incremental, tailored to the needs and characteristics of each parish. This has resulted in real benefits for local communities. For example, Shotton Parish Council was able to secure the freehold of the community centre in the village. After securing investment from Durham County Council, the Big Lottery Fund, and investing some of its own money, the parish has regenerated the centre to serve local residents' needs. The building now hosts an IT resource centre that residents use for job hunting or upskilling, as well as community activities such as youth clubs and dementia groups.

### **Cornwall**

Cornwall Council has worked to support parish and town councils to improve their local areas. This has included undertaking the transfer of over 400 assets and services. An example of one asset transfer is Par Running track, whose future was in doubt in 2016 due to council budget pressures. A group of motivated local residents, track users and the local parish council in Par Bay got together and co-developed a proposal that would see the site being leased from Cornwall Council and transferred to local management. Cornwall Council also supported the project with a one-off capital grant to ensure the facility was in a suitable condition. The community-led coalition has gone on to establish a multipurpose hub, with library services, a café, a gym, after-school sports, as well as a new BMX track and green exercise trail. The project has been recognised by government as a success in building and strengthening local community (MHCLG, 2019a)

## Problems and issues

Parish councils are not found consistently across the country. They tend to be a rural phenomenon; relatively few exist in urban areas. 83 local authorities have no parish councils, and a further 37 have five or fewer (Baker et al, 2020). Most of these authorities lie in larger urban areas: Greater London, Liverpool, Greater Manchester, and the West Midlands (Baker et al, 2020). Where a parish council is based also shapes what can be achieved, with more deprived areas bringing in a smaller precept, and often having lower levels of community knowledge and capacity on how to operate and navigate local government structures (LGA, 2018).

In some parishes it is also not unusual for elections to local councils to be uncontested and for members to be co-opted because there are fewer candidates than places available (Sandford, 2021: 15). According to NALC's 2019 election report, 71 per cent of town and parish councillors were elected uncontested or co-opted onto the council, while 34 per cent of councils had vacant seats (NALC, 2019). In some cases, applications to become a parish councillor are so low that vacancies from retiring councillors are left empty (Willett, 2018).

There are a number of reasons for this lack of participation. For example, parish councils have an image problem. A study by the University of Exeter with Cornwall Council showed that, although most people know that parish councils exist, they don't have a positive perception of them and don't necessarily feel that they reflect their interests (Willett and Cruxon, 2019). The view is that parish councillors tend to be of a particular demographic – middle class and retired. As a result, councils are stuck in a 'self-perpetuating cycle' – the lack of diversity means that only a narrow set of issues is covered and they are approached from a particular set

of perspectives and possible solutions. This amplifies the perception amongst many local residents, particularly young people, that parish and town councils are not relevant to their needs and interests (Willett and Cruxon, 2019).

Another problem is that they are characterised as process-heavy and formal in how they operate. Those unfamiliar with protocols around statutory sector meetings tend to find them both unwelcoming and unengaging. Another related concern is the lack of training and support for parish councillors.

In terms of parish council coverage in deprived or 'left behind' areas, it is likely that the level of bureaucracy involved is also a factor. Setting up a parish or town council is a three-stage process: it involves local residents and community groups submitting a petition containing the signatures of at least 7.5 per cent of the local population, followed by a Community Governance Review carried out by the local authority, which can take up to 12 months from the submission of the petition. The final decision is ultimately left to the local authority and it can decide not to set up a parish or town council (DCLG, 2012). Local people concerned to create change in their communities may simply regard such processes as a distraction from the 'real work' they want to do.

## Proposals for change

Government commits in the Levelling Up White Paper to make parish and town councils easier and simpler to set up (DLUHC, 2022). This is very welcome. It was identified as a measure that would attract broad support in our conversations with the community leaders delivering Big Local. However, as the discussion above demonstrates, other changes are needed if parish and town councils are to achieve their potential in improving local areas.

The great potential of parish councils, and the benefits they can bring to local areas, should be made more accessible to a wider range of communities. This could be achieved by making them easier to set up and more advantageous. Onward's (2021) research project 'Double Devo' proposes a series of pragmatic reforms in this regard. These include: an automatic ballot of voters in every local area currently without a parish or town council, to ask whether they want to adopt one; removing the lengthy community governance process and veto of the local authority; ensuring that 25 per cent of revenue from the planned 'infrastructure levy' goes to parish councils, providing an estimated £175,000 income for every existing council and building from the existing Community Infrastructure Levy arrangements for those with neighbourhood plans; expanding the role of parish councils by extending the General Power of Competence; and, lastly, creating new powers to devolve functions down from district and unitary councils, including the maintenance of green spaces, management of civic assets, street cleaning, the licensing of markets and street trading and the ability to invest in faith buildings. The quality of governance must also be strengthened, for example by requiring that every town and parish council is at least two thirds elected and restricting numbers of uncontested and co-opted members (Onward, 2021).

A University of Exeter (Willett and Cruxon, 2019) study highlights that improving the governance and democratic legitimacy of parish councils also requires measures to widen participation and engagement. Such efforts should include developing new ways for individuals to get involved and engage with local issues through social media and new technologies, such as the mobile phone apps currently being trialled by a number of councils

(Willett and Cruxon, 2019). Other recommendations aimed at encouraging more people to become local councillors include making it easier for people to stand for election and serve, promoting contested elections, and undertaking a census survey of councillors to pinpoint underrepresented groups (NALC, 2015).

To help residents make the most of the potential of parish councils, government should provide support for capacity-building (LGA, 2018). Community leadership training and development are not always provided to prospective councillors, and any training that is available is funded entirely by parish councils themselves. This puts those councils which are not able to raise significant precepts at a disadvantage, particularly in areas where levels of community and associational activity are low (NALC, 2015). As well as improved training opportunities, the capacity of local residents to get involved with parish councils could also be built by improving dissemination of information about the councils' structure and processes (Willett, 2018). Another form of capacity-building – sometimes referred to as 'clustering', a process of building collaborative networks between small councils facing similar issues – would enable peer-guidance and targeted support in areas where communities most need it (NALC, 2015).

In summary, parish and town councils should be reformed. They should be supported to effectively use wide powers to improve their local areas – working in a way that is inclusive and engaging. They should also be rebranded as organisations which can effectively deliver for local communities.

## Neighbourhood forums

Neighbourhood planning was first introduced in the Localism Act 2011. The process is designed to empower local people and ensure that they get the right development to meet their needs. Broadly, such plans gain statutory weight and enable residents to play more of a role in the development of their area, including where new homes, shops and offices are located. Parish or town councils, where they exist, must take the lead on neighbourhood planning. Areas without a parish or town council (which is most urban areas) must designate the neighbourhood area and set up a neighbourhood forum in order to create a plan (for more detail on the process see Box 9).

Neighbourhood forums show that local people are keen to take on the challenge of getting together to identify local priorities and keen to take tangible action to level up their neighbourhood. Forums demonstrate the potential of resident-led participation and decision-making to regenerate local areas, both socially and economically; they have untapped potential and could take on wider responsibilities, beyond planning alone.

### Potential

Neighbourhood planning is regarded as the most popular element of localism; more communities have taken up this right than any other option. Since it was introduced, the number of neighbourhood plans has steadily increased – from six approved plans in 2013, to 245 in 2019 (MHCLG, 2019).

The neighbourhood planning process has also brought a range of benefits to communities up and down the country. It has helped to increase the amount and quality of housing available and its affordability. The local knowledge and

networks provided by neighbourhood forums help to locate possible sites – and more sites than would otherwise be identified (Parker et al, 2020: 16). It has also improved the quality of new housing developments. A review of 141 neighbourhood plans found that affordable housing and green, renewable design were well-represented (Parker et al, 2020: 15). A significant proportion of housing in these plans was also allocated to address local housing needs and secure tailored provision for older people (Parker et al, 2020: 15–16).

New uses for the neighbourhood planning process continue to emerge, including: coastal change management areas, developing local flood policies, establishing heritage trails, and advocating carbon neutral developments, in addition to meeting the challenges posed by climate change through local mitigation and adaptation strategies (Parker et al, 2020: 18).

The neighbourhood planning process encourages community action. It catalyses a broader local discussion about community needs and potential, and often triggers a desire amongst residents to develop a wider range of community activity. Those neighbourhoods producing a plan generate a much wider breadth and richness of community action than can be incorporated in the plan (Parker et al, 2015). And over 60 per cent of communities have indicated that the experience of community planning generated other projects and initiatives in their neighbourhood, from one-off events to developing community land trusts (Parker et al, 2020: 18–19). There is also evidence that neighbourhood forums can: improve local networks; provide a focal point for liaison between the state and local residents, particularly fostering closer partnership working between communities and planning officials; and, to an extent, improve attitudes towards local development (Parker et al, 2020: 19).

## Problems and issues

Since neighbourhood planning was first introduced, academics have been tracking the experience of the communities seeking to implement it. They have identified a number of issues or problems with the process, which serve as a disincentive for engagement, particularly for the most deprived or 'left behind' communities that lack confidence and capacity:

- the complexity of the process and the significant work involved in putting plans together, which places a significant burden on volunteers;
- the need to have technical knowledge and understanding;
- a lack of clarity, structure and consistency in the support communities get from local authorities and government (Parker et al, 2019; 2020).

The overall conclusion is: "clearly, marginalised neighbourhoods must be better supported and encouraged to participate" (Parker et al, 2019). This is backed up by the noticeably low take-up in urban areas, and in northern regions (Parker and Salter, 2017), and by the fact that a large proportion of communities have had to stall or abandon their plan before completion (750 out of 2,500 communities by February 2019) (MHCLG, 2019b). Thus, neighbourhood planning is failing to deliver benefits for the deprived neighbourhoods which would be likely to gain most from it, and needs reform if it is to support government's levelling up agenda (Parker et al, 2020: 4).

Along with Locality and Create Streets, the New Social Covenant Units (NSCU) have recently published a report on how communities can have a greater say in local development. They argue that assembling the required extensive evidence base for a neighbourhood plan (see Box 9) makes the process "time consuming and costly", meaning that "take up is higher in wealthier areas with more resources and more time and usually undertaken by older residents" (NSCU, 2022: 13). Even after the time and energy taken to put them together, neighbourhood plans can still be overlooked. NSCU references cases where neighbourhood plans have been "simply ignored", leaving communities with no other option than an expensive judicial review (NSCU, 2022: 13).

This reflects our conversations with community leaders in Big Local areas. They suggested that the most significant barriers to engaging in neighbourhood planning are: a lack of awareness and understanding of what it offers; the high levels of bureaucracy involved, and the time and technical skills required to successfully engage (Local Trust, 2020b). These issues are magnified in the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods, where people are less likely to be well networked and less aware of both the benefits the process might offer and the funding and support available for participation. Residents in these areas often have other pressing issues and concerns that can deter them from paying the entry costs of neighbourhood planning. Particularly, given awareness that even when all that effort is expended, plans can be side lined by the local authority.

## Box 9: The neighbourhood planning process

Areas that lack a parish or town council need to set up a neighbourhood forum in order to develop a neighbourhood plan. The forum needs to have at least 21 members who either: live in the neighbourhood; work there and/or; are elected members for a local authority that includes all or part of the neighbourhood. The local authority must approve membership of the neighbourhood forum to make sure it meets these conditions.

The next stage is to gain local authority approval of the area the neighbourhood forum or the parish or town council would like the plan to cover and within which the policies set out in it will apply. Parishes may opt for the plan to cover only part of their area or may work in partnership with other parishes or forums so that the plan covers a broader area.

The plans developed need to meet a number of criteria, known as the 'basic conditions'. These include requiring the neighbourhood plan to:

- Have regard to national policy and guidance;
- Contribute to the achievement of sustainable development;
- Be in general conformity with the strategic policies contained in the development plan for the area of the authority (or any part of that area)

Plans are independently examined to make sure that they meet these conditions. If they pass the assessment process, the local authority organises a referendum. If more than 50 per cent of local residents who vote support the neighbourhood plan, it becomes part of the statutory development plan for the area and planning decisions have to be taken in line with it and the rest of the development plan.

Parish and town councils and neighbourhood forums can also go through the same process of engagement, independent examination and referendum in order to obtain a neighbourhood development order. Such orders grant permission for development that the local community wants to see in the area, either a new building on a particular site (for example, a housing development or community facility) or changes to the area (for example, encouraging new housing by allowing the upper floors of shops to be renovated into flats).

Some funding and assistance are available to support the process (see Box 9). Those undertaking a neighbourhood plan are eligible for up to £10,000 in funding. Technical support, including professional advice on technical or process issues, is also offered for those communities facing more complex issues in developing their neighbourhood plan. And, in 2020, the plan for more funding to help communities in urban and deprived

areas was released. The criteria for falling into an 'urban' area is being non-parished, and for being a 'deprived' area is those identified as being in the 20 per cent most deprived according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation. This additional package is intended to recognise and address the unique challenges that have prevented these areas from taking up neighbourhood planning so far.

## Box 10: The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)

The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is a charge which allows local authorities to raise funds for local infrastructure from new development. A CIL liability is triggered by planning permission for a new development, and the levy starts to become payable when development commences. The levy is intended to focus on the provision, improvement, replacement or maintenance of new infrastructure so that the new development does not compromise on meeting local community need (Locality, 2021: 9).

For those local authorities that decide to levy a CIL on development – not all do – they determine how it is spent. However, they must allocate a ‘neighbourhood portion’ to parish and town councils, where they exist. The amount of the neighbourhood portion varies depending on whether there is a neighbourhood development plan in place. In areas where this is the case, 25 per cent of the levy collected from the development is available; elsewhere it is 15 per cent (Locality, 2021: 10). In areas without a parish or town council, local communities, including neighbourhood forums, should be consulted on use of the neighbourhood portion of the CIL.

In 2020, the Planning White Paper proposed replacing the CIL with the Infrastructure Levy, a mandatory, flat-rate charge set nationally according to value. Levied at the point of occupation, the aim was to capture a “greater share of the uplift in land value that comes with development” (MHCLG, 2020: 10). A concern with the proposal was that as the levy was to be paid *after* a development was completed, essential infrastructure improvements would not be addressed in sufficient time to support local communities’ needs.

## Proposals for change

It seems clear that neighbourhood forums could play a larger role in improving their areas and extending their ambit beyond the existing scope of neighbourhood planning. In this way, they offer the potential for residents of non-parished areas to have a greater say on the issues that matter to them. Extending their responsibilities and resource base would enable this potential for community action to be released (Parker et al, 2020). However, if neighbourhood forums are to be set up and operate effectively in the most deprived or ‘left behind’ areas, then the residents of these areas need long-term, ongoing support to build their confidence and capacity to engage.

The New Social Covenant Unit (NSCU, 2022: 14) suggests that strengthening local planning authorities’ duty to assist groups and introducing more targeted support to disadvantaged and ‘left behind’ areas would increase take-up of neighbourhood plans across the country, particularly in those areas where they are currently least common.

Neighbourhood planning provides a valuable mechanism for local people to have a say in how their area is developed. However, the process is challenging. A better balance needs to be achieved between robust process and the recognition that those developing plans are volunteers. The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill contains a provision designed to achieve this – neighbourhood

priority statements, a simplified process for communities to influence planning. There are no legal requirements for their sign-off by local authorities, but there remains a question as to whether they will carry weight when important development decisions are being taken.

Local planning authorities also need better resourcing and training to ensure residents receive appropriate support with the process. This would enable them to better fulfil their neighbourhood planning functions, resulting in much faster plan-making. It would also ensure that neighbourhood plans are granted the weight they deserve when planning applications are assessed. Research suggests that often this is not the case, and that this may very likely deter others from embarking on neighbourhood plans in the future (Parker et al, 2019).

Our conversations with the community leaders delivering Big Local suggest that greater efforts need to be made to reach out to the residents of deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods, to make them more aware of the options for participating in neighbourhood governance, including by influencing local development. And this needs to be part of a larger programme of ongoing support intended to address the historic disadvantage and social infrastructure deficit that these areas face. Ultimately, this is the best way to ensure a wider and more inclusive adoption of neighbourhood forums and neighbourhood planning. Without deeper and more holistic outreach and support, the residents of the neighbourhoods that would most benefit from participation are unlikely to consider it a viable option.

A smooth neighbourhood planning process depends on the cooperation and support of the local authority. Similarly, parish and town councils will be more or less effective depending on how the local authority views them and the extent to which it chooses to partner with them. The next chapter considers the role that local government can play in supporting community governance and stronger communities.

## Relationships with local government

In our conversations with Big Local partnership members, they stressed that the organisations most important to the success and legacy of their efforts to improve their neighbourhoods were local authorities. They acknowledged the pressures on local government, due to budget cuts and increased demand for services (particularly social care). And, because of these pressures, they called for a radically different approach to how local government relates to the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

This chimes with research from think tank New Local (2019), which shows that addressing issues such as inequality, local decline, and loneliness and mistrust requires a paradigm shift, one that puts trust in individuals and communities and gives them the support to enact change over the long term. New Local's (2019: 25) research highlights that what it terms the existing "state-market paradigm" is hierarchical and transactional, and risks stigmatising and disempowering those receiving services. A shift of the dial towards a community paradigm would "place the design and delivery of public services in the hands of the communities they serve" (New Local, 2019: 7). This would foreground the latent skills, capabilities and resources which exist in communities, supporting residents to build the confidence and capacity to be involved in local decision-making and to achieve transformational change in their area.

## Transitioning to a new approach

Most local authorities are aware that the approach of doing things 'to and for people' rather than alongside them is no longer viable. Many are therefore seeking to transition to ways of working that are more facilitative, building on the assets that already exist in neighbourhoods. These include residents' skills and their passion for and commitment to the place where they live. But many local authorities feel stuck. They want to make the change but they lack the necessary expertise and resources, particularly because it would mean a significant shift both in organisational culture and working practices.

Big Local areas are well aware of the potential of stronger local government/ community partnerships. Their residents emphasise the power and scope of local government to support the development of communities that are proud of their neighbourhood and active in improving it. Local government can:

- partner with community groups and local social enterprises to deliver the services that local communities need;
- choose to procure goods from local community and voluntary groups;
- delegate responsibility and budget to parish, town or other local community partnerships for the delivery of appropriate services;
- designate assets as being of community value, giving communities a chance to buy them;
- transfer buildings or land they own to community groups and organisations, helping to provide a sustainable source of revenue for community activities;

- often determine access to government funding, for example, most government funding for levelling up will be channelled through local authorities;
- support and foster community level activity through small-scale grants, peppercorn rents for premises, the provision of technical support, and through the CIL (see Box 10);
- control the planning process and green-light or stall development plans, including neighbourhood involvement in them through the approval process for neighbourhood forums and plans (as discussed in the last chapter) as well as their local plan.

Notably, though, these local authority powers are less relevant to the most 'left behind' communities, which lack civic institutions and residents with the confidence and capacity to engage in activities such as community asset transfer. In such neighbourhoods, the imperative is to build social capital and civic engagement as a starting point, in which local authorities have an important role.

## Exploring good practice

Patrick Melia, the CEO of Sunderland City Council and Local Trust trustee, describes walking his patch and finding that some wards were desolate, with people behind closed doors, lonely and isolated, and others were vibrant, with lots of activity. The difference between these wards was not the extent of deprivation but the presence or absence of social infrastructure supporting the development of social capital. Social infrastructure is the key foundation stone that needs to be put in place in the neighbourhoods that lack it. It provides the fertile soil needed to grow community confidence and capacity to positively influence public sector provision, manage budgets and provide defined local services. But it needs

to be recognised that it may take several years of patient investment and support to cultivate it in the areas that most lack it.

Some local authorities are actively engaged in developing social capital in their areas, particularly in their most 'left behind' neighbourhoods, acknowledging that over the long term it will pay dividends in addressing loneliness and isolation, and the mental health problems that result. More generally, it will help them to manage demand for their services by supporting prevention. One well-known example is Barking and Dagenham (see Annex). Their premise is that getting people out of their houses and engaged in activities in the community is the first step in a civic engagement process with significant benefits for the individual and wider society.

Local authorities pioneering this approach believe that it helps them to achieve their aims and meet statutory responsibilities through more targeted and cost-effective interventions. There is evidence of:

- improved health and wellbeing – community leadership in health services can result in better outcomes, including lower levels of poor mental health and higher engagement with health-promoting behaviours (Marmot, 2020: 98);
- a boost to local economic development – research from the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (2020) shows that, when given a budget to improve their area and freedom to determine their own priorities, communities often prioritise local economic development, investing in targeted, impactful and person-centred support to boost employment and skills in the local area;
- greater potential to embed early intervention and prevention – the use of community and family networks in the design and delivery of services can result in more sustainable outcomes (New Local, 2021: 72).

The Annex provides concrete examples of local authorities that understand the importance of properly listening and responding to community needs and aspirations, and the value of capitalising on the skills, energy and commitment of local residents. The local authorities highlighted actively support the development of social capital and civic action and encourage residents to play a role in determining priorities, co-creating or developing services, overseeing provision and managing budgets at the neighbourhood level. There is great potential to build on their successes and share the learning from their work to inspire other local authorities.

## Big Local areas

While some local authorities are developing 'next practice' in how they work with and relate to their local communities, others are not focused on this agenda (Siodmok, 2017). In fact, our conversations with the community leaders involved in Big Local, although they highlighted some exemplary practice, painted a generally negative picture of local government/community relations.

It is likely that some of this negativity is explained by the nature of Big Local areas:

- **Big Local areas are amongst the 20 per cent most deprived on the Index of Multiple Deprivation.**

Research suggests that these areas have tended to suffer disproportionately from cuts in local government funding, with a consequent reduction in the services and facilities available to residents (Institute for Government, 2022). This may relate to the location of these neighbourhoods, which are often geographically peripheral, on the edges of towns and cities. Local authorities may have decided to concentrate investment in city and town centres.

- **Their residents suffer from 'initiative' fatigue and are sceptical about traditional approaches to funding and support**

Long-standing residents of Big Local areas report that they have seen many initiatives come and go without delivering real change to the community. In their view this lack of traction is because communities had things 'done to' them, as opposed to being supported to make their own change. For example, external organisations and consultants were parachuted in and were often seen as benefiting most from programme funding, leaving when funding came to an end and taking the skills and knowledge gained through the programme with them. This has bred scepticism of traditional approaches and a desire for something different which builds confidence and capacity amongst community leaders and local residents.

- **In the early days Big Locals often experienced local government resistance to a community-led approach;**

In the early days of the programme in 2011/2012, many Big Locals reported that there was some tension with their local authority about how they proposed to spend the £1m they had been awarded. In some instances, the local authority tried to persuade them that it should be spent on its general priorities as opposed to the more specific priorities determined by the local community. In some instances this led to the local authority being unsupportive. Over the years since, this tension has in most instances dissipated as Big Local areas have delivered real value and achieved positive change in their communities and local authorities have sought to engage with and learn from the approach.

## Problems and issues

One issue that emerged very strongly from our conversations with the community leaders delivering Big Local is that they often find it very difficult to engage with local authorities, let alone influence the decisions they take.

A number of issues come into play here:

- **Complex, opaque structures which are difficult to negotiate**

In the conversations we had with Big Local community leaders to inform this report, local authorities were perceived as being like a “black box” because it is often very hard to understand how and why decisions are made and therefore how community activists and volunteers might influence them. For example, residents in Big Local areas reported that this was a significant challenge when seeking to influence planning decisions (Local Trust, 2021c).

Some areas currently have a very complex and layered system of decision-making, with parish, district, and county councils all overlapping one another (Studdert, 2021). We heard that this can lead to a passing of responsibility, whereby the community group is passed between authorities, each claiming it isn’t their jurisdiction to deal with the request. The devolution proposals in the White Paper will help with this by streamlining the system, but they may create a different problem. Those community leaders living in areas served by a unitary authority refer to a “vacuum”, with no institution operating locally enough to respond to needs at the neighbourhood level. This can lead to frustration or inaction amongst those trying to improve their community.


- **How local authorities see their role**

Some local authorities are developing ‘next practice’ (see Annex), but quite often local authorities do not see it as part of their role to encourage and support communities to improve their neighbourhoods (Siodmok, 2017).

The Big Local community leaders that we spoke to reported that generally when the public sector refers to giving residents power, this translates to asking their views through a consultation process. Further, residents often feel that the effort is tokenistic or their involvement is unlikely to make any real difference. This is because they are being consulted on predetermined priorities or agendas that are unlikely to change, no matter the outcome of the consultation. This generates scepticism about the value of taking part, and a reluctance to do so.

One observation really resonated with participants in our conversations:

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 **Their view of regeneration is different from mine. They ask us to get involved in consultation processes, but we’re speaking different languages. They want shiny new buildings and cafes and restaurants that we can’t afford [to go to].”**

This underlines how the priorities of a particular community may be different from those of the local authority. This is sometimes referred to as the “dog fouling problem” (Derges et al, 2012). Residents say they are most worried about dog fouling or fly tipping in their area but the local authority dismisses these as trivial issues, deciding other things are more important. If, rather than acknowledging the issues that have most resonance with residents, local authorities dismiss them, this undermines community faith in consultative processes and trust in the willingness of the council to take their concerns seriously. In turn, this makes it less likely that a constructive partnership can be fostered to tackle the issues that the local authority does consider mission critical.

- **How community representatives are regarded**

Local government officers and councillors need to recognise the value and importance of 'experts by experience' and to respect the views of community members. In some local authority areas this is the case, with Big Locals being asked for help designing services on the basis that the community provision that they are delivering is proving to be highly effective.

Community leaders say that they often feel held back by the fact that they are not seen as on an equal footing with representatives from the public sector, despite living in the area under discussion and having a deep knowledge of the needs and aspirations of residents. They noted that they often have to overcome negative stereotypes – being seen as “amateurs without relevant skills or expertise” – before those working in formal institutions, such as local authorities, will engage with them (SMK, 2021). They described being viewed as “isolated service users requiring support or as disruptors of the status quo” by local authorities (SMK, 2021). Community members on advisory groups or panels reported being dismissed as “only the community representative” (SMK, 2021).

The perception was that, in some areas, councillors and local authority officers were either too constrained by bureaucracy or too keen to hoard their power and so it was not being shared with local community groups and organisations. Initiatives seeking to redress the power imbalance, particularly for those living in the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods, can be frowned upon and occasionally thwarted. This needs to be addressed if we are to increase engagement with political processes, and start on the track to building a deeper democracy in which more residents, particularly the most deprived or 'left behind', feel motivated and supported to engage and make a difference in their neighbourhoods.

The upshot of all of this is that many of the community members delivering Big Local say that they find themselves operating against the grain. They have to work really hard to establish their legitimacy, and get the needs and aspirations of the communities they represent recognised by those in positions of authority.

## Proposals for change

Research from New Local (2021) highlights new ways in which the state and community groups are working together at the local level. Spurred particularly by the huge community mobilisation seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, these new modes of operation are gathering speed and popularity across the country. However, more needs to be done before we can reap the rewards of a facilitative local state which challenges and empowers communities to collaborate in developing and delivering solutions which meet local needs and respond to local aspirations.

A collaboration between ten Conservative MPs, the New Social Covenant Unit, New Local, Locality and Local Trust makes a strong case in support of the facilitative state model and its potential to build lasting change for communities across the country (Baillie et al, 2021). If Westminster wants to see the whole country benefit from the strengths, assets and richness of civic life and heritage in local communities, it must demonstrate its trust in local people (Baillie et al, 2021). Devolution to local councils is “not enough”: “‘double devolution’ of power from local councils into the hands of local people” is the only way to ensure communities themselves have a fair share of power and resources to improve their area (Baillie et al, 2021: 17–18). This, they argue, is “the best way to level up our country ... through our communities, investing in the institutions and infrastructure that bring people together and create stronger social bonds” (Baillie et al, 2021: 38).

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# Part 2: A new governance framework to enable community leadership

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## Principles for success

The Levelling Up White Paper (DLUHC, 2022: 13) states that “for levelling up to mean something to people in their daily lives, we need to reach into every community in the country, from city centres to rural areas, in order to start to rebuild social capital and self-reliance in our most abandoned neighbourhoods”.

This is a welcome shift in focus – one where neighbourhoods, and their ability to take control of their own fortunes, are brought to the fore. Previous discussion had centred on regional imbalances and the gap in the fortunes of the north and the south of England or the value of investing in cities. This ignored the important fact that the imbalances *within* regions are often as great if not greater than differences between them; both the north and the south have pockets of wealth adjacent to areas of extreme deprivation and community need.

At the same time, there is a consensus that the current approach to community or neighbourhood governance isn't working as well as it might; that it is failing to give those living in the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods the possibility of addressing the challenges they face. A new system is needed. This chapter sets out the principles that should underpin it:

- **Participation:** devolution of decision-making responsibility to the lowest geographical level possible;
- **Community-led:** a transfer of power to communities, enabling them to improve their neighbourhoods and residents' prospects;

- **Supporting people:** investment in capacity building;
- **Neighbourhood funding:** budget responsibility;
- **Reducing red tape:** a simple, easy-to-understand, governance system with the lowest possible level of bureaucracy.
- **Devolution to the lowest geographical level possible – to neighbourhoods**

An accepted principle of devolution is 'subsidiarity': government bodies should only perform tasks that cannot be performed at a more local level. The principle applies to local as well as central government. Combined and other local authorities should not perform functions that would be better performed by communities at the neighbourhood level.

The Localism Commission (2018: 35) showed that devolution to the neighbourhood level builds “dynamic accountability”, addressing feelings of disconnection and disenfranchisement felt by many communities up and down the country. The Commission found (2018: 35) that ongoing community participation ensures that projects and programmes are more directly accountable to the interests and needs of local residents. Strong neighbourhood governance also enables local people to have the voice and confidence to feed into the activities of public and private bodies and organisations at every stage.

Based on our experience of the Big Local programme, communities can be trusted to run a wide range of services in partnership with local authorities and other local institutions. They are the experts in the needs of their area and the aspirations of residents. They have demonstrated their capacity, with the right support, to design and run local services and facilities that are finely tuned to these needs and aspirations.

We have witnessed through the Big Local programme how it:

- enables services and facilities to be designed and delivered by residents, achieving traction and better outcomes as a result;
- can over time begin to shift the social and economic tide in neighbourhoods;
- can build civic institutions capable of supporting communities into the future;
- bring different groups together, making communities more cohesive.

The potential is perhaps greatest and the benefits most marked in the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

Obviously not all services or all budgets can or should be devolved to communities at the neighbourhood level. For example, bus services need to be coordinated on a regional or county level. However, where community devolution is possible it can pay massive dividends; equally, where it is not, local residents should be given more of a say in the services that they use and that affect them. And, when they live in the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods, in which levels of confidence and capacity to advocate on behalf of the wider community are comparatively low, they should be supported to inform and play a role in decision-making processes.

#### • **A transfer of power to communities**

Consultation or consultative forums do not equal community power and are not a sufficient response from the perspective of those living in the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods who, generally based on their experience, are sceptical about consultation. They typically feel that their contributions have not been properly listened to or acted upon in the past. They often view such engagement as superficial and a tick-box exercise. Often these communities want more power over, and responsibility for, the decisions that affect their neighbourhood and for the transfer of local budgets where feasible and appropriate. One question worth considering is – without such responsibility and the cash to back it up, is there any meaningful transfer of power?

At the very least it seems clear that community power means partnership – either a partnership that involves the co-creation of projects with the public sector or the delegation of budgets to communities.

#### • **Investment in capacity-building**

'Left behind' areas have seen a disproportionate decline in the number of civic spaces where community activity takes place (Onward, 2020). The OSCI/Local Trust Community Needs Index (CNI) shows that 73 per cent of 'left behind' neighbourhoods have fewer community space assets, such as youth clubs and village halls, than the national average (OSCI, 2021). These places also lack the networks needed to help communities organise themselves – 'left behind' neighbourhoods are less than half as likely to have a registered charity in their area, and even less likely to have other third sector organisations such as co-operative societies (OSCI, 2021).

This helps to explain why participation in community activities tends to be lower in 'left behind' neighbourhoods than other areas – polling showed only 8 per cent of residents had taken part in a local community group over the previous year, compared to approximately 16 per cent of people in England (Survation, 2020). Rates of unpaid voluntary activity are also much lower – 14 per cent compared to 36 per cent across the country (Survation, 2020).

'Left behind' neighbourhoods, as the White Paper acknowledges, tend to lack social capital and social infrastructure. This means local residents are less likely to have had the opportunity to develop the skills and confidence required to lead change, such as participating in community forums, mobilising volunteers or engaging in communal activity. And, with less social or community infrastructure in the form of spaces and places to meet and strong civic organisations, these communities find it much harder to organise. As research from Public First (2022) on community capacity-building concludes:

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 **Empowering communities starts by building up their capacity to engage, through social infrastructure and by creating effective links between residents, voluntary and third sector organisations, and local government."**

- **Budget responsibility**

Big Locals areas often report that having a budget to improve their areas is very significant in their relationship with the local public sector. Community groups often find it difficult to get an audience with decision-makers: mentioning that they have a pot of just over £1m to improve their area and leverage other funding tends to get them a hearing.

The money is important in that it helps to equalise power between a group of residents who have in all likelihood previously considered themselves powerless and the local public sector which they have previously regarded as holding all the cards.

Managing a budget also builds confidence and capacity, enabling community members to become effective project designers, planners and managers, and making them powerful advocates for community interests, thereby changing the status quo. It creates a growing sense of self-efficacy which means that projects achieve better outcomes.

- **A simple, easy to understand, system with low levels of bureaucracy**

There is agreement that one of the reasons why there isn't wider take-up of formal neighbourhood or community governance mechanisms (parish and town councils and neighbourhood planning) is because of their complexity and the bureaucracy involved. This issue is discussed in greater detail in Section 1.

Local Trust's experience of delivering the Big Local programme shows that a framework is needed within which local people can nominate and get behind a neighbourhood governance model, access funding and appropriate support and take action without bureaucratic barriers. This means that the system should be as straightforward and accessible as possible, and flexible and responsive

to the existing landscape of community activity and organisation on the ground.

In spite of changes introduced in the 2011 Localism Act – designed to encourage their adoption particularly in urban areas where they are much less common – parish councils are not a popular option. Since the new provisions on parish councils came into force, only one has been set up in London. Other attempts have been made and been blocked by borough councils, potentially putting some communities off (Sandford, 2021: 10). Across the nation as a whole, their coverage is quite sparse. They cover only 40 per cent of the population (Sandford, 2021:8). Similarly, neighbourhood planning processes are regarded as too bureaucratic and time-consuming. It is little wonder then that they tend not be deployed in the most deprived or 'left behind' parts of England, the very areas that would in all likelihood most benefit from them. Research by the University of Reading carried out on behalf of Government indicates that only 6.7 per cent of completed neighbourhood

plans cover the most deprived areas (Parker et al, 2020).

As indicated in Section 1, changes need to be made to both parish and town councils and neighbourhood forums in order for government to achieve the step change in community empowerment envisaged in the Levelling Up White Paper. The Localism Commission (2018: 19), for example, recommends making it easier to establish parish councils and reduce bureaucracy, and the extension of powers which can be designated to neighbourhood forums in non-parished areas in order to build upon the strongest and most effective structures that already exist within neighbourhoods. These changes should occur within the context of a new strategic framework which takes into account the important role of local government and the need to ensure that communities living in the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods are able to fully engage.

## A strategic response

The Levelling Up White Paper (DLUHC, 2022: 215) says that in order to: “deliver substantive and sustainable change, local places need the power to create and deliver solutions to local challenges”. It commits government to working with partners in local government and civil society on a programme to put in place a bold new approach to community empowerment. This aspiration to breath fresh life into community or neighbourhood governance is very welcome. In this chapter, we set out how we think it might be achieved in the most deprived or ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods in order to inform the government’s proposed review and the pilots it plans to run testing new approaches.

As this report demonstrates, committed individuals who are working exceptionally hard, on a voluntary basis, to improve deprived and neglected neighbourhoods and to build stronger more prosperous and resilient communities often feel that they are having to do this work on their own. Their view is that they are without support or encouragement from local or central government, who too often – the perception is – simply put bureaucratic hurdles in the way of positive change.

The implication is that we need a new, more radical approach as opposed to tinkering with the current system. Vibrant local governance – with meaningful integration with other tiers of government – is essential in driving forward a devolution agenda which can empower neighbourhoods to resolve local issues in whichever way they deem fit (Localism Commission, 2018: 19). As the We’re Right Here Campaign Group (2022) argues:



**We need to reset the foundations of public policy, so it supports and incubates the solutions that are already there in our communities, rather than always starting with a blank sheet of paper in Whitehall ... [We need the] decisive shift in the balance of power local communities have been waiting for.”**

And we need to ensure that any new approach that is developed and adopted works for and makes a difference in the most deprived or ‘left behind’ areas in which it could have most impact.

Such a reset was supported by community leaders in our conversations with them. They argued that systemic change is needed “to deliver any form of lasting improvements to ... [deprived or ‘left behind’]... neighbourhoods” (SMK, 2021). They wanted more “acts of imagination”, both on the part of the state and local communities, so that we can design new processes of governance and service delivery that are based around “reciprocity and listening to the lived experiences” of residents (SMK, 2021). This will ensure public services which are both more efficient and able to tackle the problems that people face now, and more resilient and prepared for the challenges of the future. It will help to deliver an improved quality of life for every community and secure greater prosperity over the long term.

The response we propose is based on the principles outlined earlier in this report:

- **Participation:** devolution of decision-making responsibility to the lowest geographical level possible, that is to neighbourhoods;
- **Community led:** a transfer of power to communities, enabling them to improve their neighbourhoods and residents’ prospects;

- **Supporting people:** investment in capacity-building;
- **Neighbourhood funding:** budget responsibility;
- **Reducing red tape:** a simple, easy to understand, governance system with the lowest possible level of bureaucracy.

These principles reflect learning from the Big Local programme. The programme demonstrates that a genuine transfer of power is possible. It has very few rules, and local 'accountable bodies' manage the grant administration and financial reporting to reduce the burden on volunteer community members.

## A new framework for neighbourhood governance

To address the challenges set out in this report, we require a new framework for community and neighbourhood governance that enables residents to take the lead where they want to and supports local authorities to deliver services effectively. In this new system, we propose that resident-led decision-making, management, and delivery of local services and facilities, should be the default positions for driving change in policy and practice.

Implementation of the change needed will require a cultural shift that sees residents as leaders in developing solutions and ensures that decisions are made based on the principles of subsidiarity: trusting local people to make decisions that affect them whenever appropriate.

There is no silver bullet for the design of local government that would effectively address the issues community leaders have raised with us; the quality of a community/local government relationship is dependent on the culture of the authority and the calibre of its staff. But making community powered solutions the

default – shifting funding, decision-making and programmatic management into the hands of local people – will remove much of the bureaucracy that is such a barrier at present and will position councils as more responsive and open to imaginative and intensive cooperation.

The enabling framework we envisage would have a number of elements designed to address the problem that community power is currently a postcode lottery. This is because its presence is dependent on the strength of local community infrastructure and local government awareness, knowledge and commitment. This report points to a need for change under three headings: investment, governance and community leadership.

## Invest to renew social infrastructure in 'left behind' neighbourhoods

We know that people in 'left behind' neighbourhoods want more power and control over how money is spent in their neighbourhoods. But they face a unique challenge. They are held back not only by high levels of deprivation but also by a significant deficit in social capital and social infrastructure. This means local residents are less likely to have had the opportunity to develop the skills and confidence required to lead change, such as participating in decision-making forums, mobilising volunteers or engaging in communal activity. And, with less social infrastructure in the form of spaces and places to meet and strong civic organisations, these communities find it much harder to organise.

There is a real risk that, without additional support to build their own capacity, these communities will be unable to take full advantage of those measures in the White Paper designed to devolve more power to communities, strengthen

neighbourhood governance and provide access to new funding programmes to improve their areas. We know that support to build confidence and capacity is

needed to enable nascent community leaders to negotiate and thrive in processes and forums which might otherwise seem daunting.

### Recommendation 1: Investing in social infrastructure in 'left behind' neighbourhoods

Long-term funding provided through a Community Wealth Fund (CWF), funded by dormant assets, to seed community activity and civic participation and identify individuals willing to work with the public and private sector to influence local decisions.

### Recommendation 2: Supporting capacity-building

A new Network for Communities (NfC), modelled on the New Schools Network which supported parents establishing free schools, should be established to work alongside the CWF to provide advice, support and mentoring to funded communities. This recommendation also builds on the learning from Big Local which provided the resident-led partnerships delivering the programme with targeted support to build their confidence and capacity. Support was tailored to the needs and interests of local people and their priorities. It included ongoing peer support and has enabled residents to deliver on their plans and enact change in their areas.

## Make neighbourhood governance accessible to deprived communities

This report argues for a new formal system of neighbourhood governance which is accessible to deprived or 'left behind' communities. The data shows us that the most 'left behind' areas tend to lack parish or town councils to represent their interests and also tend not to establish neighbourhood forums for neighbourhood planning. The major obstacles are that people are uncertain about the options open to them and their effectiveness and value, and can find established processes and ways of working alien. In addition to investment in social infrastructure – a necessary foundation to ensure individuals in the most deprived or 'left behind' communities have the confidence and capacity to participate – we need a new, very different, approach to stimulate and support effective participation.

Ten years into Big Local, the community leaders involved in delivering the programme tell us that they find statutory

community governance structures – parish and town councils and neighbourhood forums – generally both too limited in scope and too bureaucratic. We need a more impactful, simpler and more engaging approach. This should be based on some set principles, with core requirements. It should be adaptive and not impose a set bureaucratic and restrictive model on every area, otherwise the participation costs will always be too high for deprived or 'left behind' communities.

The underpinning principles of the new system should be:

- **Participation:** devolution of decision-making responsibility to the lowest geographical level possible;
- **Community led:** a transfer of power to communities, enabling them to improve their neighbourhoods and residents' prospects;
- **Supporting people:** investment in capacity-building;
- **Neighbourhood funding:** budget responsibility;

- **Reducing red tape:** a simple, easy to understand, governance system with the lowest possible level of bureaucracy.

The proposed reform would have two main planks:

- reforming parish and town councils and supporting them to effectively use wide powers to improve their local areas;
- where such councils and forums do not exist, enabling strong and accountable community organisations – community partners – to take on this role.

Rather than imposing particular approaches on neighbourhoods, we believe that the imperative should be to build on the strongest, most effective, structures that already exist.

Community partners could be assessed by their local authority, to check that they operated according to a particular set of principles and core operating standards. Bureaucracy could be kept to the minimum necessary, whilst still guaranteeing accountability.

This may seem like a radical proposal but the principle of granting community organisations (once designated as partners by the local authority) certain statutory powers of stewardship of their local areas was established in the Localism Act 2011. This enabled community organisations to develop a Community Right to Build Order, a form of Neighbourhood Development Order that grants planning permission for certain types of development in a specific local area. More than a decade on from the Localism Act, and reflecting the significant contribution made by local community organisations to their local area (in particular in response to the pandemic), it is time to extend the role and remit of trusted local community partners.

The principles and operating standards for community partners would be established

based on extensive consultation, but they should include commitments to:

- over time, work across the full range of issues of concern to local residents (as opposed to focusing on a very narrow range);
- prioritise community voices and 'lived experience';
- open and accessible membership, with diversity and inclusion embedded into both membership and all operations;
- carry out in-depth consultation and community research to inform their plans;
- develop constructive relationships with the local statutory and private sectors;
- ensure that funding and other resources reach those parts of their area and those people who are most deprived or 'left behind';
- learn from best practice in engaging local residents and encouraging participation.

This proposed new system would have accountability challenges but these could be overcome (see Box 11).

In the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods without civic organisations which could take on the role of community partner, the proposed CWF and NfC, should support residents to establish community groups, which would eventually be capable of taking on this role.

### **Recommendation 3: Strengthening formal neighbourhood governance structures**

The role of parish and town councils and neighbourhood forums should be promoted and developed and they should be supported to become more inclusive and engaging to enable them to play a fuller role in improving both their areas and socio-economic outcomes for residents.

### **Recommendation 4: Community partners nominated by residents**

Our proposal is that local people, including community leaders, should be consulted and should nominate the strongest and more effective community organisation in the neighbourhood to be the community partner in areas without parish or town councils or neighbourhood forums.

### **Recommendation 5: Powers for community partners**

Community partners that satisfy the assessment criteria should have the same powers that parish and town councils and neighbourhood forums currently have, including the ability to provide services and to benefit from local taxation and the neighbourhood portion of the levy on development.

## **Box 11: Accountability**

There are three main issues to be considered:

**Accountability to the local community.** Local people would be consulted to be asked to nominate the most effective and representative community partner. Nominations for the community partner would be put to a local referendum (similar to the current process for neighbourhood planning) to ensure the organisation which takes on the role has credibility locally. The community partner would also need to demonstrate an ongoing commitment to local residents deciding what should be done and how; plans would need to have broad community support, and not be directed only at minority or factional interests.

**Accountability for the management of spending.** Community partners will be vetted to ensure they have the systems and structures in place to effectively manage funds. They will be formally constituted bodies. Each will have detailed governance arrangements, including Constitution, Rules, Codes of Governance, and propriety arrangements. In many cases these will be overseen by an external regulator – for example, the Charity Commission or the Regulator of Social Housing. The use of properly vetted accountable bodies will ensure that any funds are applied in line with the best standards of financial propriety whilst minimising unnecessary bureaucracy.

**Accountability for failures.** Prevention is the best safeguard. The leadership of the local community provides an unusual degree of scrutiny and protection against waste and inefficiency. Nevertheless, the potential for failure cannot be ruled out, for example, the failure of services that community partners have taken on responsibility for. In these cases, there will be formal agreements setting out the terms of the transfer and responsibilities on each side, including provisions to ensure service quality and to deal with weaknesses and failure. In the unfortunate event of complete failure, these agreements will no doubt provide for the commissioning body to take the service back in house (or transfer it to another contractor).

## Put power and resources into the hands of communities

Local authorities should develop a new facilitative approach, transferring power and resources to local communities. A change in culture as well as structure is required in local government. The conversations that we have had with the community leaders delivering Big Local indicate that some in local government – both officers and councillors – can be resistant to delegating power to communities or even to sharing power with them by taking their needs and aspirations into account in their plans. Those living in the most deprived or ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods tend to feel this most intensely. They believe that they have been ignored by the state, at both national and local government level.

The dominant model has been that of local authorities as service providers, doing things *to* people rather than *with* or *for* them. The consensus is that this needs to change. It is an old paradigm that doesn’t work. Doing with or alongside communities or – even better – supporting them to meet their own needs and aspirations and do things for themselves, in a way that makes sense to them and which builds on the resources and assets already in that neighbourhood, tends to be much more effective. From the perspective of the local authority, it helps to manage demand for services. From the perspective of the community, it helps to secure more responsive and appropriate services. Importantly, it helps to shift the negative and very damaging narratives that can develop about the most deprived or ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods and can make people ashamed to live in them. This is the obverse of the community or civic pride that government seeks to foster, as referenced in the Levelling Up White Paper, by moving the focus to the strengths and potential of residents (DLUHC, 2022).

Local authorities need to develop a new approach that is facilitative and enabling. As this report illustrates, some local authorities have already started to model such an approach and this has generated really helpful learning on how to make the change. However, we do not underestimate the extent of the cultural shift needed and local authorities, with all the pressures on them, are unlikely to grasp the nettle without having an imperative and the appropriate support to do so.

We appreciate the scale of the challenge. Local authorities will require training and support if they are to make the necessary change and engage in the new form of place leadership we espouse. In this new model they would work closely with communities: delegating funding to them, commissioning them to deliver services, procuring services from them, and transferring assets to them.

Our experience is that the best way of levelling up ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods is to delegate funding directly to them. Statutory community partners – once recognised as demonstrating appropriate accountability, transparency and community engagement by the local authority – could take on responsibility for distributing funds available to benefit their neighbourhood, particularly levelling up funds. They would be well placed to engage the local community in project planning and delivery to secure maximum local benefit.

The approach we advocate involves supporting, facilitating and building community resources particularly in the most deprived or ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods; the objective being to build stronger, more prosperous and resilient communities.

**Recommendation 6: A Community Power Act**

The government should bring forward a Community Power Act, or include relevant provisions in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, which would provide that all decisions about services and facilities should be made at the most local level possible and with the participation of local people.

**Recommendation 7: Support for local authorities**

Local authorities should be provided with training and capacity-building support in order to achieve the cultural change needed; this will require specific investment.

**Recommendation 8: Delegate national funds to neighbourhood level**

Government funds aimed at achieving levelling up, such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), should be delegated to community partners to ensure that they reach 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

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# Conclusion

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There have been various attempts by policy makers to promote, support and sustain effective community and neighbourhood governance over the past decade or so. However, these have failed to fulfil their potential. This report has explored why existing mechanisms – parish or town councils and neighbourhood forums – have not achieved as much impact as they might have been hoped in the most deprived and ‘left behind’ communities.

The report’s central message is that any reform to community or neighbourhood governance should be judged principally on their success in improving such local areas and the prospects of residents. Where new approaches are successful in effectively engaging, representing and giving decision-making power to residents, this can provide the foundations of a wider growth in local civic activity and political engagement – building civic pride, addressing alienation from our political system, and improving outcomes.

The community leaders involved in the Big Local programme have given us invaluable insight into what needs to change in order to make community and neighbourhood governance more accessible and impactful. They want to establish and engage in processes that make a real difference, processes which are transparent, proportionate and genuinely engaging. In order to achieve this, this report advocates for:

- investment in social infrastructure;
- the building of residents’ capacity to improve their areas; and
- the genuine transfer of resources and power to local communities.

Together, the proposals outlined in this report would lay the foundations for a new framework of community and neighbourhood governance. They would replenish our stocks of social capital and unlock community leadership across the country, giving residents in the most deprived and ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods the decision-making authority and direct access to the resources that they need to drive genuine change.

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# Annex: Next practice in local government

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## London Borough of Barking and Dagenham

Barking and Dagenham Council has been part of a remarkable experiment in building community power and control in recent years. The Every One Every Day initiative, launched in 2017, is a collaboration between the council, the Participatory City Foundation and residents and local community organisations. The project aims to empower residents to share and engage with each other and thereby make practical participation a key building block for improving the everyday life of residents. One key element of the initiative is five 'shops', located on high streets across the borough, which provide a space for people to meet, discuss ideas and launch projects. This sits alongside the 'Warehouse', the largest market space in the UK, full of equipment, facilities and support for local residents to kickstart a small business. The initiative has brought opportunity, hope and connection to one of London's most deprived boroughs.

Barking and Dagenham Giving (BD Giving) is another project which emerged from a pilot platform hosted by Barking and Dagenham Council, becoming an established charity in 2020. In November 2021, the charity convened an advisory group of 12 individuals invested in the future of Barking and Dagenham. All of the members are residents in the borough and currently meet monthly to co-design the investment policy. The steering group was originally intended to serve for nine months, assisting the staff and trustees of BD Giving in establishing the strategy for funding projects. This has since been extended to a two-year term, a reflection of the participant's enthusiasm and BD

Giving's focus on equipping residents with financial management skills, as opposed to rushing the process of developing the strategy. Building on the success of the programme to date, BD Giving has since seen 50 local people involved in fund allocation decision-making and over £125,000 distributed to local causes.

## Barnsley

Barnsley Council has established an effective means of devolving power to the local community: establishing Ward Alliances, made up of community representatives who have put themselves forward to work with councillors to identify priorities in their local area. Members can nominate themselves if they are part of a local group or are already active in their community. Ward Alliances are responsible for developing a community plan to set targets and measure progress.

Crucially, each Ward Alliance has access to a Ward Alliance Fund. Community groups can apply for funding for specific projects they see a need for and would like to deliver; their applications are discussed and decided on at meetings. Ward Alliance funding has facilitated a vast array of services and organisations in Barnsley. Examples range from community gardens to canal clubs supporting the local environment, toddler groups equipping parents with valuable life skills, park runs, and social clubs for elderly people.

## Cornwall

Cornwall Council's approach to community power has taken the form of a programme of devolution to parish and town councils. The programme is overseen by a monthly devolution board, of which many of the council's key partners are members. Each community project or initiative goes through a two-stage process, with an initial expression of interest followed by a more detailed business case.

Emphasis is given to the social value that is created by working in closer collaboration with communities and local people, as well as the financial implications for both the council and the devolution partner. The bulk of initiatives to date have related to the transfer of assets and responsibility for maintaining community facilities, putting them into the control of the local parish or town council. In total over the last ten years, Cornwall Council has put over 285 assets and services in the control of local communities.

This programme of devolution has provided important learning and an impetus for community-led action across a wide range of public services. Building on the community partnerships fostered via the devolution programme, the council is now driving forward plans for more integrated health and social care. Its Living Well Pioneer project is built on the premise that listening to people about their individual needs and aspirations, and shaping the care and support system around these, will enable services to be more effective and financially sustainable.

## Essex

Essex County Council has led the way in embedding community engagement into the commissioning of its services.

The 'Revolutionising Recovery' project highlights the huge potential of this approach. A major community commissioning project supported by the council and Social Finance, it was set up as an independent charity and is co-led by a board of expert trustees and a Recovery Advisory Committee, comprising local people with experience of addictive substance recovery and services. Through a grant agreement with the council, the committee plays a major role in selecting and commissioning drug and alcohol recovery services in Essex, whilst simultaneously working to reduce stigma.

Revolutionising Recovery shows the benefits of community-powered services. At an early meeting members of the assembled board highlighted a more cost-effective approach based on their experiences as service users; this would not have been highlighted but for their involvement.

## Warwickshire

Warwickshire County Council is changing the way children and young people relate to their local authority by getting them directly involved in decision-making. The Children and Young People's Participation and Engagement Strategy 2019–23 is mainstreaming child and youth participation across the councils' activities.

The strategy covers several areas where young people can take on responsibility, including commissioning, quality assurance, planning and design of council services, as well as the recruitment and training of staff, and public communications. The strategy also encompasses rewards and incentives for children and young people to get involved, regional and national participation events, and facilitating relationships between children and young people and senior council leaders. The strong culture and commitment to supporting children and young people's voices at a senior level of the council is a key part of the work that has evolved during the implementation of the Strategy.

The Youth Council is an important element, aimed at gathering views and understanding the needs of young people across Warwickshire. Last year the Youth Council ran a consultation called 'Have your Say'. The results showed that the top three priorities for young people were: reducing plastic waste; support for mental health; and developing better careers advice and work experience opportunities. These priorities were then fed into the development of the council's plan for the delivery of services over the next five years.

## Wigan

The Wigan Deal is an asset-based and place-based approach to developing and delivering public services, building on the strengths of local communities to improve outcomes. The Deal is composed of several smaller 'deals' on healthcare, children and young people, social services, and community funding. It has been successful in delivering health and wellbeing improvements, and high levels of resident satisfaction, as well as over £141m in financial savings (The Relationships Project, 2022).

The biggest shift has been a cultural one: "transform[ing] how public servants and local people understand their roles in creating successful, healthy communities" (King's Fund, 2019: 1). As part of this aim to develop a new council-citizen relationship, Wigan Council put resident engagement at the heart of designing their most recent corporate strategy. Known as the Big Listening Project, this was the largest ever resident consultation undertaken by the borough, with over 6,000 residents in 83 locations across Wigan having their say on what matters most to them. The aim was to give everyone a chance to shape the latest version of the agreement: Deal 2030, a strategy which outlines the council's priorities for the next eight years.

As a result of the Big Listening Project, Wigan Council identified ten goals which together comprise a unifying strategy for the whole of the borough. Each goal now has to be delivered on, and the Council and its partners will be accountable for whether they have been achieved through a number of partnership boards as well as its own governing bodies.

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## About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources, and decision-making into the hands of communities. We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding, and to draw on the learning from our work delivering the Big Local programme to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

**Local Trust**

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