

Manifesto for community and neighbourhood governance reform

Realising the potential of 'left behind'
neighbourhoods: Four principles
for change

Local Trust

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Manifesto for community and neighbourhood governance reform

Realising the potential of 'left behind' neighbourhoods: Four principles for change

Good governance is essential to the health of our communities and neighbourhoods. Reforming the system of neighbourhood governance could be transformational, especially for the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods. In this manifesto we set out a framework for reforming neighbourhood governance based on four principles.

1. All communities should have access to good governance

Statutory structures like parish councils and neighbourhood forums can offer stability, continuity and established processes. They work well in many areas, but they do not work everywhere and they tend not to exist at all in the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods. For example, only 6.7% of completed neighbourhood plans are in the most deprived (IMD Q4/5) areas.

Creating parish councils is complex, and forums are regarded as exclusively concerned with planning rather than wider socio-economic issues and area improvement. We need more flexibility in the system and access to simpler and more engaging options to widen participation to all groups and individuals.

In the most deprived neighbourhoods currently lacking parish councils and neighbourhood forums their functions could be fulfilled by existing effective community organisations, such as community anchors.

These community organisations would be required to demonstrate that they were capable of performing the critical functions of parish councils and neighbourhood forums and meeting requirements set for levels of local support and accountability.

Residents might be given the opportunity to choose this option, giving them easier access to the same powers, responsibilities and funds as those in areas that are parished and/or have a neighbourhood forum, but building on what exists rather than adding new hurdles.

How it could be achieved:

Through the introduction of legislation enabling community organisations who meet set criteria to have the same powers and responsibilities and access to funds as parish councils and neighbourhood forums.

2. Build community capacity to increase uptake and inclusion

Good community governance rests on a foundation of strong social infrastructure. It flourishes in neighbourhoods rich in community organisations and activities – these create and support the development of community leaders willing to actively participate in improving their neighbourhoods.

The most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods have fewer community organisations and individuals with the confidence and capacity to form them. Social and civic infrastructure needs to be rebuilt in these areas in order to improve outcomes. This is a deficit that both national and local government need to address.

The best councils recognise that local government has a crucially important role to play in supporting the development of community capacity and facilitating greater resident leadership on local issues. National government could do more to create an environment conducive to the creation of stronger, more resilient communities at the neighbourhood level.

The [Community Wealth Fund](#) will provide a firm foundation on which to build capacity if it is implemented in accordance with the principles the government has set out for it: allocation to disadvantaged neighbourhoods that lack social capital; long term funding with wrap around capacity building support; and residents deciding spending priorities.

How it could be achieved:

National government should develop a community policy aimed at increasing community capacity in the most deprived and 'left behind' neighbourhoods, building on what we hope will be effective implementation of the Community Wealth Fund.

3. Bureaucracy should be enabling, not obstructive

The bureaucracy involved in statutory neighbourhood governance mechanisms (parish and town councils and neighbourhood forums) is one of the biggest barriers to participation. Community minded people want to contribute their time and effort but too often the rewards are underwhelming. To tackle this, the principle must be 'minimal process, maximum impact'.

When bureaucracy obstructs participation, this leads to deficits in accountability (through uncontested elections and an over reliance on co-option), and ultimately weakens democracy.

Functions like planning are complex, and some process is necessary – but the level of bureaucracy involved should be the minimum compatible with effective delivery, accountability and legitimacy, and procedures that do not add value or duplicate should be removed.

How it could be achieved:

Legislation should be introduced collapsing the three-stage process for setting up a parish council to two stages, and to minimise the tests required for a neighbourhood plan, and/or government should pursue the planned 'neighbourhood priority statement'.

4. Transfer power to communities

An accepted principle of devolution is subsidiarity or the delegation of powers and budgets to the most local level possible. This has not yet been realised. The centralisation of power in Whitehall and town hall has not served us well. There is an urgent need for a more imaginative approach – one that trusts communities to know what is best for their local area and its residents.

Building on existing good practice, the public sector should be encouraged to take a community centred approach, building on the skills, talents and commitment of the people living in deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods, working with them on plans to improve outcomes and offering support to implement them.

Facilities and services developed by and with the communities at which they are targeted tend to have greater traction and achieve better outcomes. In our experience delegating decision-making responsibility for relatively small amounts of funding to communities and providing them with the support to spend it well, pays dividends: it builds community confidence and capacity, supporting local residents to work together to improve their local area and their prospects, with one community project often spawning many others.

How it could be achieved:

Local authorities and other local public sector bodies should be incentivised by government to delegate decision making and budgets to communities where appropriate and where communities have an appetite to take them on.

About this manifesto

This manifesto for community and neighbourhood governance reform emerged from discussion at a consultation event organised by St George's House, Windsor and Local Trust in September 2022. The event gathered together a range of experts on community and neighbourhood governance including academics, community activists and representatives of civil society organisations and local government. It considered how the existing system needs to change to realise the potential of residents in the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods to work together to improve their areas. One of the recommendations emerging from the consultation was the preparation of this manifesto. It has been drafted by a sub-set of attendees at the consultation. It reflects the consensus that emerged from these discussions and not the detailed policy positions of all the organisations that participated.

Read the report on the St George's House/Local Trust consultation at: www.localtrust.org.uk/insights/research/reforming-neighbourhood-governance/

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.

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