

## **SEEING THE WOOD FOR THE TREES**

### **The evolving landscape for neighbourhood arrangements**

The “neighbourhoods agenda” today has two explicit goals:

- Developing democratic voice, scrutiny and power for people in neighbourhoods
- Improving neighbourhood service delivery and the local public realm.

These are real and pressing needs which are closely connected at local level. They are complemented by the imperative to revitalise mutual aid, respect and social cohesion in localities. Taken seriously, the neighbourhoods agenda represents a genuine opportunity to help transform the character of citizen engagement and neighbourhood life. The policy design work presently being brought to bear on important details of the agenda such as community assets or trigger mechanisms needs to be placed in a wider context. That is why we offer in this discussion paper an analysis of the landscape of English neighbourhood governance, and of how it might evolve.

No governance model will be appropriate to the challenges of every neighbourhood. But the flourishing of local particularity can lead both to a bewildering proliferation of initiatives and engagement mechanisms, and to people in some neighbourhoods being left without real opportunities. Seeing the wood could help us understand how the trees fit in. It may also help us develop governance structures that are more effective, responsive and robust.

This discussion paper is not intended to prescribe any single model for neighbourhood governance, but rather to clarify how enabling frameworks presently operate, how arrangements might fit with the broader landscape of local governance, and how the menu of options available might be extended. It is organised into six sections:

1. This introduction, setting out some general principles for the analysis
2. A sketch of how local authority area working relates to neighbourhoods
3. A basic typology of neighbourhood governance structures
4. Options for innovation within this structural landscape
5. Process innovations and reforms to extend the menu of options
6. A suggested framework for assessing which issues could best be tackled at neighbourhood level

The closer one moves to street-level action, the less structures matter and the more important practices and relationships become. “How you do things” in a neighbourhood matters more than your place in the local constitutional order. But structures cannot be ignored. They set the frame for action, and can turn into obstacles or create conflicts. We need to know what structures can enable good practice in neighbourhoods in different contexts. Only then can our approach to the more important and challenging tasks of culture change, practice development and process innovation bear fruit.

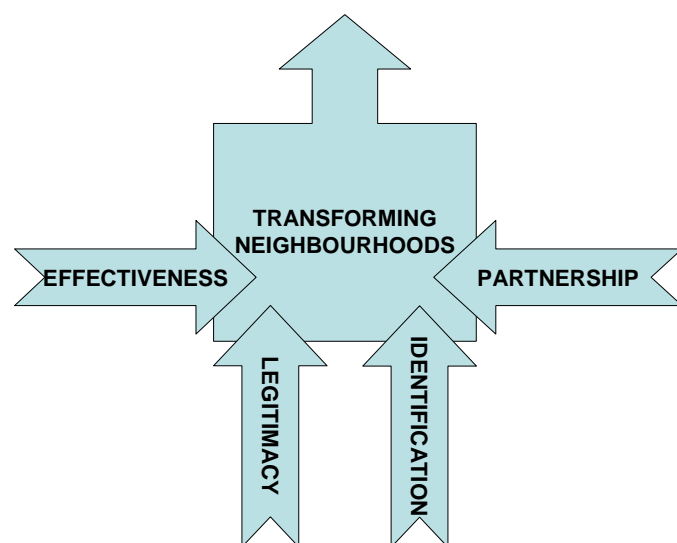
### Criteria for neighbourhood arrangements

We would suggest that over time, the national framework should provide a context for developing neighbourhood arrangements that:

- a) complement and underpin local governance as a whole
- b) are drawn from a family of approaches which are commonly available and easily comprehensible
- c) can respond to the lifecycles of neighbourhood engagement, as enthusiasm, capacity and challenges wax and wane
- d) include straightforward and practical avenues for “ordinary citizens” to become engaged around particular issues
- e) increasingly enable connections between the variety of neighbourhood issues to be addressed
- f) keep distinct the twin issues of democratic voice and scrutiny on the one hand and service delivery on the other, recognising that they may often require differing but complementary approaches
- g) involve a variety of avenues and modes of democratic engagement
- h) sit within an appropriate risk management framework

It will take more than a couple of months to refine this context. There are four dynamics that need to work together if neighbourhood arrangements are to deliver practical rewards and improve quality of life:

- *Legitimacy* – political authority, often grounded in a clear mandate from electors
- *Identifications* – the extent to which people feel a sense of belonging and common challenges, identifying with the area defined as a neighbourhood and concerned about its issues
- *Effectiveness* – mechanisms for improving public services and the local public realm



- *Partnership* – the practical process by which a variety of authorities, organisations and individuals work together to make a difference

We will always face challenges in aligning these dynamics, but they provide good principles by which to navigate the design of neighbourhood arrangements.

### **International comparisons**

This discussion paper draws in part on UK experience and also on an initial review of neighbourhood working in other countries, seeking to draw out lessons from there for the very different context of English local governance. There is no space here to provide detailed studies of the international evidence we have examined, but some of the more pertinent examples include:

- The fact that the smallest executive councils serve an average population of 118,500 in the UK, but in the US and much of Europe the average scale of local governance power is an order of magnitude smaller, usually *several thousand people*
- Scottish and Welsh *community councils*, which shed comparative light on issues such as the composition, establishment and disestablishment of English parish and town councils
- Ireland's *town councils* which have a substantial range of functions, some delegated upward, some delivered through substantial budgets as with the former urban district councils
- Substantial experience in Scandinavia, often subject to *political volatility* – e.g. Copenhagen's structures which, being dependent on the principal authority, were abolished on a change of control in 2000
- Some interesting practice in *linking the levels* of principal authority and neighbourhood governance, for instance in Lille's community councils (on which councillors sit alongside elected neighbourhood representatives) or Indian *grama sabhas* or village assemblies such as those in Kerala
- The neighbourhood-based *participatory budgeting* system of Porto Alegre and other examples from around the world, where the detail of the design is crucial to the shape of engagement and outcomes
- *European experience* of neighbourhood management, activism, action planning and budgeting, including in Utrecht, Turin and Barcelona
- Considerable experience from *a range of US models*, including neighbourhood working in Chicago, New England town meetings and mini-mayors (where experience from San Jose suggests caution is in order).

## **Headline recommendations**

Our headline recommendations follow, very general in character at this point:

- The policy design needs to combine rights and powers with neighbourhood capacity-building and public authority change agendas
- Neighbourhoods should have the opportunity for considerable power in a limited range of core areas dictated by subsidiarity, focused where there are likely to be few negative externalities
- Neighbourhoods should have some budget power, and the flexibility to win further powers in time
- Where there is clear demand for a formal neighbourhood structure, it should be easy for citizens to establish it – disestablishment should be equally easy provided there is broad support
- A variety of arrangements should be available dependent on context – processes and outcomes matter most
- Ward councillors should have the chance to lead, but not a general right to block (by which we mean that they should be empowered to play a leading role in neighbourhoods, but not given a direct veto over all neighbourhood initiatives or arrangements)
- Public authorities need to tackle administrative barriers that may frustrate neighbourhoods working, from constraints around Local Area Agreements to the paucity of neighbourhood data

## LOCAL AUTHORITY AREA WORKING & NEIGHBOURHOODS

The relationship of the neighbourhoods agenda to ongoing processes of devolution, decentralisation and reorganisation is vital. We need to understand how the two differ to see how value can be added at neighbourhood level. We also need to consider how neighbourhood engagement and local authority area working can fit together constructively in the big picture of UK devolution. As a recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation report concluded, alongside the task of coordination between local authorities, the police, health and other partners, “the new challenge is vertical integration between neighbourhood and district, city and subregion. Governance systems are needed which interlock in meaningful ways without duplicating.”<sup>1</sup>

### *What is area working?*

Local authority area working can be divided into three categories:

- *Devolved political arrangements*: generally involving area committees of ward councillors (extant in 51% of leader-cabinet authorities by 2002, and holding formal decision-making powers in 26% of all authorities by 2004); in many places there are also participative area forums which have few formal powers but are used as sounding-boards for consultation (present in 54% of authorities by 2004)<sup>2</sup>
- *Decentralised administration and service delivery*: involves council staff from some functions starting to work in area teams or neighbourhood offices (sometimes coordinated with political devolution)
- *Locality partnership working*: bringing a variety of partners together around action plans or regeneration programmes, from neighbourhood up to authority-wide level

All of these structures have a bearing on the neighbourhoods agenda. With the exception of the last, they largely involve the *local authority reaching down* toward neighbourhoods, rather than the organising and taking of responsibility by people *in* neighbourhoods. Local authority devolution and decentralisation tend to take place at middling scales, often involving clusters of a few electoral wards.<sup>3</sup> Each area will usually contain a handful of neighbourhoods or more, often with very different needs and desires.

According to comparative reviews of British and European models, local authority area working tends to be organised on areas with populations of between 20,000 and 100,000. There are two typical models: small area structures (of up to a handful of wards) covering roughly 20,000-40,000 people, and district or constituency structures of several wards covering 50,000-100,000 people. The latter scale is particularly common in European

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<sup>1</sup> *Devolving governance: area committees and neighbourhood management* (JRF, 2005), the report of a seminar involving local government and academic leaders

<sup>2</sup> “Implementing the 2000 Act with respect to New Council Constitutions and the Ethical Framework” (ODPM, 2003); “Making Decisions Locally” (LGA, 2004)

<sup>3</sup> One rationale for this approach is to ensure that enough councillors sit on each area committee to provide minimum standards of good governance. Clusters of wards are common.

cities. Judgements as to what size is appropriate tend to be determined in part by local circumstance – for instance, the pre-existing natural “townships” of Rochdale are served by small area structures.

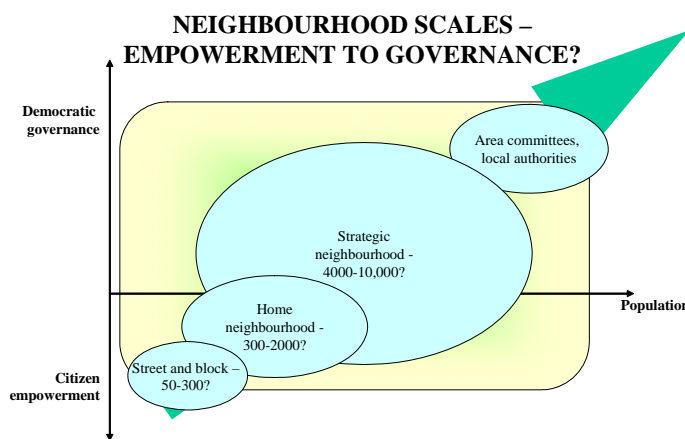
The scale of local authority area working is also however influenced by the logics of administration and partnership. Some big English cities, like Birmingham and Liverpool, have recently decided to move from small area structures toward the larger district scale. This step has been taken in part to improve strategic working with non-council partners below the level of the Local Strategic Partnership, and in part because that level is considered to make more sense from the point of the decentralisation of council services and administration. Small area or ward committees often persist in parallel, with occasional concomitant tensions. Over the coming years, continuing experiment and a gradual rationalisation of council area working structures seem likely in the light of a growing body of evidence and experience.

Local authority area working is sometimes closely aligned to natural neighbourhood and community boundaries, in particular when it comes to small towns. However, it is commonly constrained by ward boundaries and almost always takes place at a level of geography and population substantially larger than that of any recognisable “neighbourhood”. Practitioners of area working therefore find themselves challenged at once to engage strategically with a population of many tens of thousands, and to work through the specific problems of their neighbourhoods on a piecemeal basis. More bottom-up models of councillor advocacy and neighbourhood management, while promising, tend at present to be scattered and reliant on local resources or levels of capacity which are difficult to generalise.

### *What is a neighbourhood?*

The definition of neighbourhood is by nature fuzzy, but there is a general consensus among practitioners that it refers mainly to areas of circa 1000-10,000 people. (Of course, rural community boundaries make for much smaller neighbourhoods – such as hamlets inhabited by one or two families – and larger ones, like market towns which are hard to subdivide). We would suggest that there are at least three layers which are relevant in different ways for different issues, but which make both objective and subjective sense in most contexts:

1. streets and blocks of circa 50-300, where association, informal social control and mutual aid are key governance tools;
2. “home neighbourhoods” or proximity neighbourhoods of circa 500-2000 bringing together a few blocks – a scale at which neighbourhood warden schemes often make sense;
3. public or strategic neighbourhoods of perhaps 4,000-15,000 people (large enough to provide facilities such as a park or playground, a school and



surgery, a library or leisure centre and a few shops); this is where more structured governance starts to make sense. One survey of Hertfordshire parishes suggested that the population threshold at which elections started to be contested was 4,500.

<i>Strategic neighbourhood: several thousand people?</i>		
<b>Structure</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>1 for every...</b>
Electoral wards	10,661	5590 people
GP practices	10,683	5580 people
Post offices	17,846	3340 people
Primary schools	18,069	3300 people
Churches,	44,648	1310 people
mosques,	584	
synagogues	349	
Public houses	c.60,000	990 people
Libraries	c.4,500	13240 people

Overlapping neighbourhoods are a reality of lived experience, and good practice in planning suggests they should be encouraged so that neighbourhoods share space, facilities and challenges. Clarity of boundaries is nonetheless important when it comes to formal governance structures.

*What are the differences between area working and the neighbourhoods agenda, and how should they interlock?*

All too frequently in the recent policy debate, area working and neighbourhood working have been treated as if they were the same thing. They are related but clearly different in two respects:

- Firstly, the scale of area working is much bigger, providing a council framework for dealing with areas including several neighbourhoods.
- Secondly, the perspective is different. Area working is about enabling the council to engage strategically with its localities. Neighbourhood working involves empowering people in neighbourhoods to shape them from the bottom up.

It is vital that area working approaches and neighbourhood arrangements are interconnected, rather than confused. They address the same challenge – of local responsiveness – down opposite ends of the telescope. Brought together constructively, each perspective will cast a different light on problems and solutions, adding mutual value. Of course, officers and councillors can and do get involved in neighbourhood working, where positive relations with public authorities remain vitally important and bridge individuals play an important role in reconciling top-down and bottom-up perspectives.

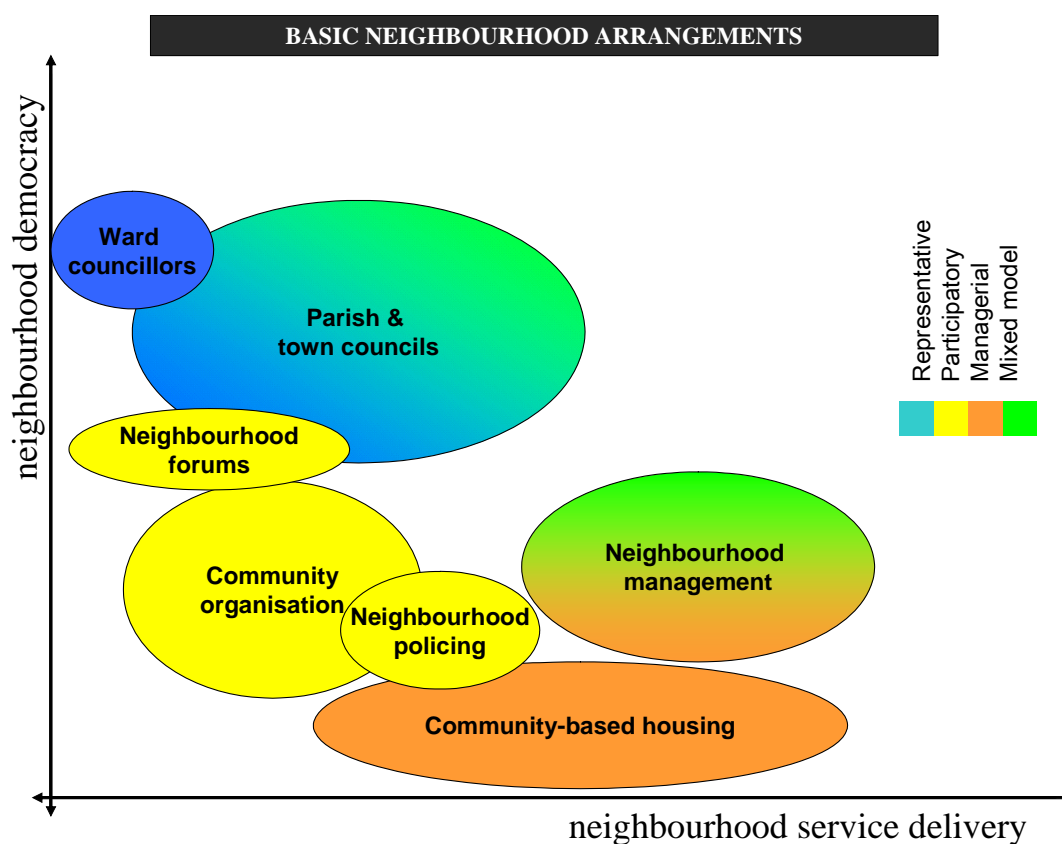
As authorities like Birmingham are discovering, devolution and decentralisation is just a first step toward neighbourhood engagement and service responsiveness, often only beginning to reveal the barriers to reshaping services and rebuilding the local public realm. While Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Area Agreements signal the way to a more holistic approach, they remain a work in progress, over-bureaucratic and insufficiently rooted in frontline neighbourhood action.

Intuitive modes of engagement on issues of street scene, community safety or collective efficacy are often found closer to the ground than any decentralisation can hope to get. The questions then arising are: what arrangements could give opportunities to people in neighbourhoods everywhere to get involved in improving their localities, and on what issues?

## A TYPOLOGY OF NEIGHBOURHOOD ARRANGEMENTS TODAY

Neighbourhood arrangements can take very different forms. Many involve not formal institutions, but looser processes of engagement or joint working (see section below). However, formal governance structures – acknowledged institutions, leaders, forums or partnerships with some sort of legal or established status – often act as the nexus for local public issues, and as an anchor for wider processes of governance and involvement. Accordingly we focus first on arrangements of this kind.

The diagram below analyses the extent to which our existing repertoire of structures tends to deliver against one or both of the neighbourhood agendas of democratic engagement and service delivery.



Each type of arrangement covers a field of variation. There are neighbourhood management partnerships more successful in developing democratic voice than in reshaping services, and neighbourhood forums involved in service delivery. The arrangements are placed on the typology above according to their core functions.

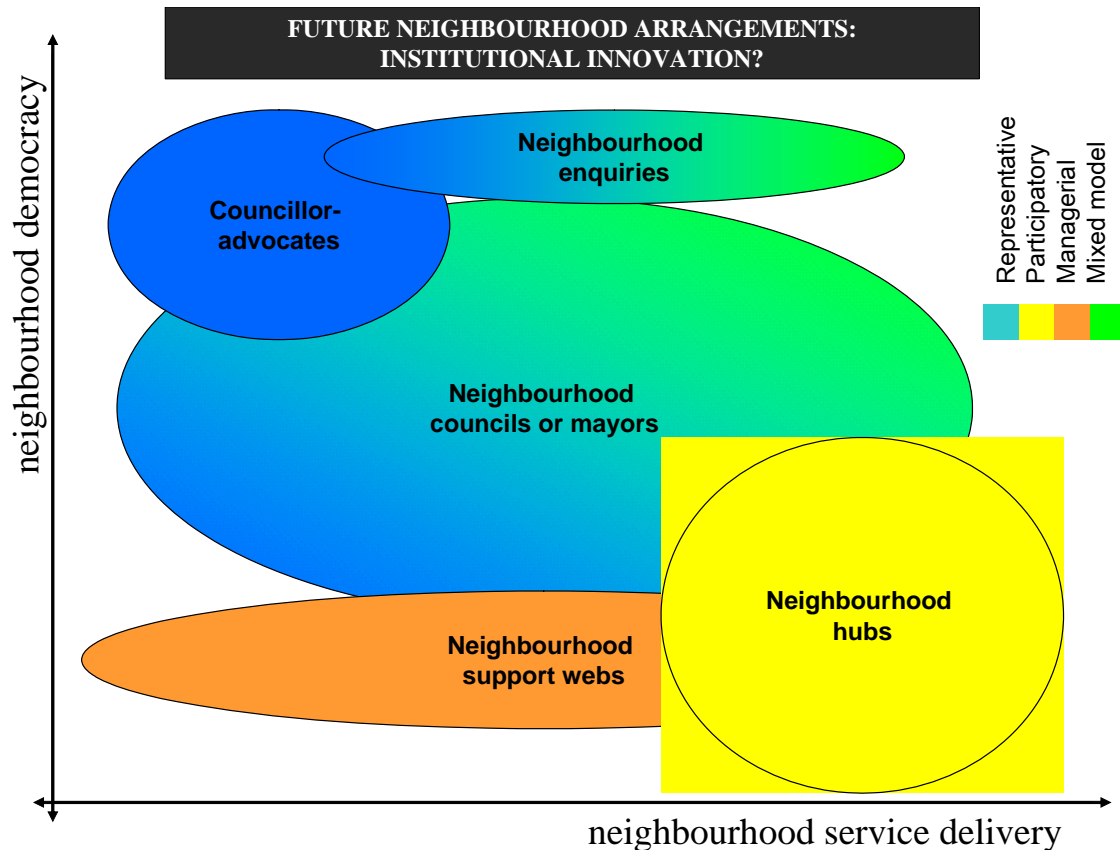
In many areas structures co-exist, but often in an uneasy, fragmented or patchy way. There is a general sense that citizens don't know what opportunities are available, and that they are in any case seldom useful for solving practical problems. The twin purposes of democratic engagement and service delivery may each require different mechanisms – perhaps even a “separation of powers” combined with accountability, partnership and challenge. More detailed analysis follows overleaf.



<b>NEIGHBOURHOOD GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES</b>	<b>Community capacity</b>	<b>Neighbourhood forums</b>	<b>Community-based housing</b>	<b>Neighbourhood management</b>	<b>Ward councillors and area committees</b>	<b>Parish &amp; town councils</b>
<b>Description</b>	Local voluntary and civic organisations and associational life, single-issue campaigning and advocacy, informal and formal community service provision	Meetings open to residents and other locals (occasionally via VCS intermediaries), providing a public space for consultation and debate on local issues; sometimes elect executives or representatives	A range of housing governance models, including community-owned housing associations, associations with tenant participation structures and tenant management organisations (TMOs) running council or ALMO stock	Usually involves a local manager and a neighbourhood partnership, bringing service provision and local people closer together in a neighbourhood, establishing needs and driving change and cooperation	"Backbench" ward councillors represent their communities, providing a focus for leadership and accountability; increasingly they are brought together in area or ward committees under devolved political arrangements (sometimes involving two tiers)	Elected "third tier" local councils, ranging from "Quality Parishes" providing excellent services and leadership to moribund structures with uncontested seats. There are almost 10,000 parish and town councils, covering roughly a third of UK population.
<b>Locality</b>	Neighbourhood, area, authority-wide, thematic	Neighbourhood, area (1,000-90,000?)	Estate, area, even authority-wide under "gateway" models (50-150,000?)	Estate, neighbourhood, area (1000-40,000, typically 5,000)	Ward, wider area (4,000-90,000)	From hamlets to market towns, mostly in rural areas (50-40,000?)
<b>Powers</b>	Informal, based on campaigning, relationships and lobbying - main power comes from delivery	Sometimes gain small budgets or limited co-governance powers, or informal power as "voice of the community"	Rent increments, housing management, provision of other local services	Little formal power - informal/voluntary influence over public authorities, small enabling budgets	Area or ward committees may control devolved budgets and responsibilities	Statutory powers include precept on council tax, service provision, right of consultation, devolved or delegated powers from principal councils; no general power of well being
<b>Relationship with public authorities</b>	Client, advocate	Client, advocate, partner	Client, advocate, partner	Client, advocate, partner, trusted change agent; council is often accountable body	Advocate and shape decisions within council; sometimes work through area partnerships with PCTs, police etc	Advocate, partner, deliverer of delegated/devolved responsibilities (often through charters)
<b>Democratic voice and modes, community engagement, representation</b>	On its own, tends to be special-interest and fragmented; occasional consensus and collaboration around key issues	Loose consensus, occasional voting, often dominated by active citizens, sometimes work innovatively to engage the wider community	Models range from managerial to resident democracy, occasional engagement of non-tenants; tend to keep to a "housing-plus" agenda	Often managerially driven, but including councillors & often elected neighbourhood representatives; seeking through consultation & participation to gather the views and needs of all parts of the community	Elected councillors, often drawing on consultative structures (either participatory or from the organised VCS)	Usually elected representatives, in many cases participation and consultation, occasional direct democracy (parish polls or parish meetings)
<b>Service delivery and reshaping</b>	Gradually becoming involved in service delivery or co-production, from maintenance to youth and care services	Occasional consultation on services, very occasionally more active involvement in influencing or delivery	Occasionally provide wardens/concierges, public space, youth services, community centres	Focused on reshaping mainstream services, driving innovation, data, customer responsiveness and joining-up; service delivery best limited to custodianship, pilots and filling gaps	Mostly scrutiny and influencing of services; occasionally responsible for decentralised council service delivery	A variety of models, from pure influencing to delivery of a wide range of environmental, housing, warden and other services (in their own right and on a delegated/devolved basis)
<b>Strengths &amp; opportunities</b>	Can harness energies of active citizenship and mutual aid to increase collective efficacy and service quality	Provide a participatory space in which a wide range of local views can be aired and discussed, complements representative structures such as area committees	Can build on citizen engagement in housing to address wider neighbourhood issues, sometimes provides a community asset base	Can influence all public expenditure in an area, not just regeneration or council funds; neighbourhood partnerships bring together all key players	Democratic representatives can get closer to communities, improving advocacy and decision-making, while remaining part of the council	Ready-made framework for independent democratic neighbourhood councils, can be set up by bottom-up initiative, service delivery, precepting and direct-democratic polling
<b>Risks &amp; weaknesses</b>	Often unrepresentative, pursuing own organisational interests, lack of capacity (especially in management and service delivery)	Often unrepresentative, possibility of capture or of conflict with representative bodies, lack of capacity, lack of power (consultation fatigue is frequently encountered)	Risk narrow focus on housing issues, exclusion of non-social tenants in mixed-tenure areas	Can be too managerial, questions about widespread replicability given costs of pathfinders, have not yet driven major innovations, no teeth	Risks of baronial control, failure to include sections of the community, rivalry with other areas, corruption, failure to engage with non-council services	Conflicts can develop with other areas or tiers, lack of capacity/quality assurance/lifecycle management, can be too focused on own services, can exclude sections of the community

## NEIGHBOURHOOD STRUCTURES: SCOPE FOR INNOVATION

The repertoire of our neighbourhood governance forms could be both extended and consolidated to fit a wider range of circumstances. This diagram presents some ideas, further discussed below. Serving different purposes, these structures could exist in parallel and be mutually reinforcing.



### Neighbourhood hubs

Neighbourhood hubs establish a stable base from which local communities can associate, pursue their hobbies and interests, and self-organise. The hub approach to neighbourhood governance seeks to create physical gathering-places as points of coherence for community capacity. Typically a hub will be a multi-functional community building, and it:

- will provide space for community groups to meet and hold activities
- may incorporate or be co-located with one or more local service providers – a healthy living centre, library, neighbourhood office, school, hospital or children’s centre
- may rent out workspace
- may provide or rent space for private or public meetings, celebrations and parties
- may be linked to other neighbourhood hubs or to local civic websites
- will generally be open to all local residents rather than a particular section – there are dilemmas here, for instance around licensed bars

Once anchored in a shared building that encourages overlapping association, communities could find it easier to activate collective efficacy when it is required. Neighbourhood hubs may underpin or lead to more formal neighbourhood governance structures, and will be particularly valuable in areas where:

- a) the population is a diverse one with few positive experiences of sharing common space (such as an inner-city zone of transition)
- b) democratic voice is articulated primarily through principal-authority representatives and organised community participation is scarce
- c) informal community organisation and associational life are strong but fragmented and single-issue (such as a leafy suburb).

Many community buildings today are owned by councils, and are derelict or run-down. Some are net liabilities requiring significant investment (for which more public and private investment frameworks need to be developed, potentially including the dormant assets commission). In many cases the best solution will be community ownership of neighbourhood hubs, and in some cases service delivery can be devolved in parallel to help deliver financial viability. Managed well, a community asset can provide stability and/or ongoing revenue streams.

Perhaps the most important effect of a neighbourhood hub is to make the invisible commonality of the neighbourhood concrete, place-based, and welcoming. A number of case studies are available on good practice around neighbourhood hubs. Some knowledge is also available on the role public space design plays in encouraging similar behaviour. Further work needs to be done on the relative merits of multi-functional and single purpose space.

### **Next-generation neighbourhood management and support webs**

Initial lessons are starting to be drawn from the national neighbourhood management pathfinders scheme and from a raft of parallel initiatives. One of the findings has been that while practitioners had expected the reshaping of services to be the initial thrust of work, in fact the process of articulating and listening to citizen voice and focusing public concern on key issues proved to have more momentum. That then became the most effective lever for service change, though progress on this front is as yet limited. The reshaping and integration of services requires a dynamic between neighbourhood intelligence and practice on the one hand, and authority-wide service provider forums which can take key decisions and spread change more widely on the other.

There is a sense that the potential of neighbourhood management and partnership is substantial, if still largely remaining to be tapped. Increasing numbers of local authorities are grappling with the concept (some in corrupted form, some with considerable invention). The broader national conversation now focuses much more on reshaping mainstream services than on one-off regeneration projects.

Different approaches will be taken in each area. But as pathfinder and Neighbourhood Renewal Fund monies start to come to an end, practitioners appear often to be moving toward mainstreaming neighbourhood management, in three senses. They are preparing to mainstream it *financially*, ensuring that the costs of neighbourhood management infrastructures are met from across local public sector budgets. They are preparing to mainstream it *geographically*, extending the practice to a wider range of neighbourhoods. And in some cases they are preparing to mainstream it in terms of *ownership*, by enabling a wider range of institutions to take the lead. Wolverhampton (where neighbourhood management from the beginning covered seven neighbourhoods, each with a different lead organisation – the council, the PCT, in one case the YMCA) provides a good example of all three trajectories.

The neighbourhood management pathfinders could be said to represent a technocratic model of neighbourhood governance, centred on a powerful manager-cum-change agent and choreographing their stakeholders through David-and-Goliath partnerships of local service providers and citizens. However, increasing awareness of the power of citizen consensus to drive change is leading to a more fundamental consideration of how this managerial agenda connects to neighbourhood democracy (and potentially to other ideas presented in this paper).

Policy should encourage the creation of neighbourhood support webs bringing together local public servants, connected both to democratic neighbourhood structures and to local strategic partnerships. Opinion differs as to whether neighbourhood management is appropriate only in regeneration areas, but most neighbourhoods across the country are supported by substantial mainstream services and face specific challenges. In the context of more general or authority-wide neighbourhood management systems, we therefore need to develop lighter models of support for neighbourhoods which are not in the top decile of deprivation.

Perhaps the most important tool in the neighbourhood management armoury is robust neighbourhood data. From objective statistics to perceptions and public priorities and the costs of local public services neighbourhood by neighbourhood, good data – and good frameworks for its presentation – are essential to understand the hierarchy of problems and develop consensus around possible solutions. In most areas key information is simply not available. Gathering it would cost a certain amount, but there will be economies of scale and considerable potential for return on investment. The importance may be sufficient to merit specific pressure being brought to bear on public authorities including Whitehall departments, potentially through new responsibilities or duties. The Audit Commission's quality of life indicators workstream and ONS thinking about a continuous population survey may provide some valuable building blocks.

### **Councillor roles: from “mini-mayors” to “councillor-advocates”?**

In the wake of the new political arrangements, the ward or “backbench” councillor is the object of much concern. Ideas have been floated for providing her/him with a new and meaningful role. Ward councillors' noticeable caution

about the neighbourhoods agenda should be understood in the light of their recent experience of disempowerment. It is important that they can develop and shape roles that *they* want to fulfil if this experience is not to be repeated. “Backbench” is a term which should be displaced from the vocabulary. Rather, we need to elaborate a range of councillor roles which involve a separation of powers and representative functions, from *executive* to “*scrutiny with teeth*” to *advocacy* to *neighbourhood governance*.

On the last of these functions, in *Vibrant Local Leadership* the idea is floated that a single councillor could be a “mini-mayor” in each ward:

- acting as the main focus for community advocacy and democratic voice
- co-ordinating the activity of a wide range of local partners
- allocating small budgets inter alia

The paper recommends at minimum an induction programme for such councillors, involving contact with local public sector managers and other key partners. Some suggest a mini-mayor system would bring in a wider range of more politically independent councillors. On the other hand, Britain already has many fewer democratic representatives than other European states, and in multiple-member wards, councillor workload is already high.

The title “mini-mayor” could lead us down the wrong path, unless we are genuinely considering turning individual councillors into the single authority for a ward with an executive-managerial leadership style, in which case we will need to give them considerable executive powers to deliver against raised expectations.

Mini-mayor systems exist in several US cities. In some cases (such as San Jose) there is considerable concern about good governance, fragmentation, private lobbying, and the quality of local decision-making and community representation when reliant on one individual. The Tower Hamlets experience of baronial fiefdoms also suggests caution in this respect. Checks and balances should be combined with *systems* of community leadership. Whether there be one or a handful in any given ward, elected members alone will not always be able to mediate local democratic voices in a balanced way or perfectly represent the diverse interests of their communities. Good practice suggests they need to lead and listen to broad participatory processes.

A better term in most cases might be “councillor-advocates” or simply “public advocates”, drawing on the essence of the role, and informed by examples such as the public advocate’s office in the city of New York. Such advocates could be resourced and encouraged to play a leading role in local campaigning, brokering and action-planning, and have a hand on small enabling budgets. *Vibrant Local Leadership* states that government is actively interested in councils piloting innovative political arrangements for community leadership. There could be one or more councillor-advocates in each ward (which may contain one or several neighbourhoods from place to place). One approach might be to elect several advocates to serve areas

spanning several wards. Another possibility is that different mandates or lists could be instituted for executive councillors and neighbourhood councillors.

To be successful, councillor-advocates would be likely to require a web of relationships of a more horizontal than vertical character: with neighbourhood officer support webs, with local scrutiny arrangements such as neighbourhood inquiries, and with broad processes of neighbourhood participation. Councillors could also specialise in local scrutiny functions, or sit on neighbourhood councils (see below).

### **Neighbourhood inquiries or commissions**

Neighbourhood inquiries could be established for a time-limited period by a principal authority, a neighbourhood structure or an independent body to address a particular issue or set of issues, gather evidence and provide proposals, recommendations or action plans. A variety of technocratic and democratic options exist for their composition. They might be convened or chaired by a councillor, and include local officials, public figures or elected representatives from across the spectrum. The idea is inspired partly by citizen's juries, and one possibility might be to invite some citizens by lot to participate. For neighbourhood inquiries to become an accepted form of good practice, we would need a few simple templates for different purposes, such as local scrutiny or action planning.

Occasional structures of this kind might provide an economical and effective tool to resolve difficulties currently being experienced by the principal authority scrutiny function, in particular in regard to the scrutiny of local or neighbourhood issues. Careful design would of course be necessary. Which body is to assess what response should be made to a neighbourhood "trigger" on community safety or any other issue? Full scrutiny is likely to be a cumbersome and inappropriate framework. Fast response scrutiny subgroups could be established. But neighbourhood inquiries could coopt members of the police authority or other bodies rapidly without requiring immediate attention of full scrutiny. A good level of organisation for such inquiries might be that of local authority area working, which could provide a little more perspective on local strategic implications.

In other cases, neighbourhood inquiries might be established not to scrutinise existing action but to assess options, propose approaches or develop action plans. This approach has already been taken in some places on an ad-hoc basis (for instance in Sheffield's Neighbourhood Commissions on housing investment). In Bolivia, citizens' vigilance committees scrutinise public expenditure on a standing basis.

### **Neighbourhood councils**

Scotland's parishes were abolished in 1973. Largely-elected community councils aligned within principal authority boundaries were introduced to take their place. These are optional, but now cover much of Scotland. Their only statutory duty is to represent the views of the local community to other authorities, though many have taken on substantially more responsibilities.

This root-and-branch reform, absolute and radical in its character, could be considered retrograde from the point of view of democracy. But it illuminates the possibility of more modest reforms in England to provide a framework for elected neighbourhood governance which is more fit for the present day, can flex to suit a range of circumstances (in particular urban areas), and connects better to principal authorities.

We need to build on existing good practice, insufficiently researched and analysed. But the existing framework for parish and town councils could also be modernised to encompass more modalities, while requiring quality standards to be met if certain activities (e.g. devolved budget management or service delivery) are to be undertaken. One simple change would be to enable *more name options* - “neighbourhood” or “village” councils as well as parish or town councils (we would lean against “community councils” because of the imprecision and increasingly-contested nature of the term “community”).

Perhaps more importantly, linking the levels through better connections between local authorities and democratic neighbourhood bodies could be encouraged by:-

- *Integrating representation*: widening the options for the composition of parish and town councils, considering ex officio options, and establishing a frame within which a core of representatives chosen through contested elections can supplement their capacity by coopting key partners –
  - learning from the experience of partnership governance, reviewing the Quality Parish presumption against cooption and positively encouraging a core of democratically elected parish councillors to coopt other local public figures with full voting rights, with appropriate safeguards and triggers to prevent cronyism and enable contestation
  - A particularly positive attitude toward the cooption of ward councillors or even MPs with full voting rights, potentially even membership ex officio (as with examples of community councils in Scotland and France, though there are constitutional precedents against ex officio membership of lower tiers in England)
  - the opportunity for elected representatives of tenant or student councils or other bodies to take seats ex officio depending on local circumstances (this could in some majority- or all-social housing neighbourhoods involve building a community council on the foundations of tenant organisation, though specific associated risks would need to be explored)
- *Multi-level participatory democracy*: frameworks for citizen participation which integrate the web of governance associated with the ensemble of public authorities, linking the engagement frameworks of neighbourhood and principal councils as well as service providers (such as participatory budgeting – see below)

- *Officer support*: frameworks for shared staffing or support by other authorities, in particular the principal authority – see Milton Keynes and various neighbourhood management models
- *Devolved budgets* from other public authorities, and greater use of parish charters between neighbourhoods and principal authorities establishing baselines, divisions of labour and so forth

Another possible reform could enable *larger “parish meetings”*, permitting areas of 200-2000 electors where the principal function is expressing democratic voice and where seats are seldom contested to decide to work through open participatory parish, neighbourhood or town meetings rather than elected councils (learning from the New England town meetings experience).

Analogous to the process for local authorities, a *mayoral model* could be developed for neighbourhood, parish or town councils, involving a variety of elected or appointed figures, but with an elected leader (who could also be the elected ward councillor) at its centre. At neighbourhood level as with principal authorities, an initiative and referendum approach should be taken to the establishment of such a model. The caveats about “mini-mayors” should nonetheless be borne in mind in any development of this idea.

We would recommend developing practices of lifecycle management, encouraging neighbourhood councils to move between modalities depending on the challenges they face, the functions they want to take on and the stage of their lifecycle. This might include encouraging a *separation of roles* which focuses neighbourhood councils on influencing and holding to account. Where they take on responsibility for services, they could be encouraged to consider commissioning delivery out to community organisations or housing associations.

The capacity and vitality of neighbourhood governance in rural areas fragmented into tiny parishes might be increased through more confederation (learning from the French commune experience) or district reviews. It should be less bureaucratic to establish a neighbourhood body, perhaps automatic within certain boundaries, though the test of public opinion could be raised and counter-petitions permitted to force a referendum. There should also be a symmetrical framework for *dissolution* by initiative and referendum, as there is in Wales. And greater and more inventive use of the *parish poll* tool could be encouraged.

Elements of this agenda might require legislative reforms, others simply guidance or flexibility. Parts could be piloted in local areas.



One can therefore envisage a variety of forms of parish, neighbourhood or town council, each suited to their locality and lifecycle:

- A core of democratically elected neighbourhood representatives with local ward councillors or tenant representatives participating alongside them, and other local public figures co-opted to the neighbourhood council or belonging to a larger neighbourhood partnership
- Neighbourhood “meetings” based mainly around participatory assemblies, for communities of less than 2,000 people
- A “neighbourhood mayor” form of neighbourhood council
- Neighbourhood councils which either deliver many services directly, contribute to commissioning a range of services, or confine their role to voice and scrutiny.

These forms would then sit within a wider variety of neighbourhood arrangements, many of which would not require a formal tier. Even if this more flexible and responsive framework is made available through legislation, it is still likely that only a minority of neighbourhoods will demand their own elected councils. They should not be imposed across the board. As experience of the range of approaches started to build up, just as it has for the range of new political arrangements in councils, review of the framework would be appropriate.

## NEIGHBOURHOOD ARRANGEMENTS: GENERAL PROCESSES, TOOLS & INNOVATIONS

While the neighbourhood governance *structures* we have focused on up till now often provide the focus for empowering people at very local level, there are a variety of *processes, practices* and *tools* which do not rely on any particular body to be successful, but can be implemented in a variety of institutional settings.

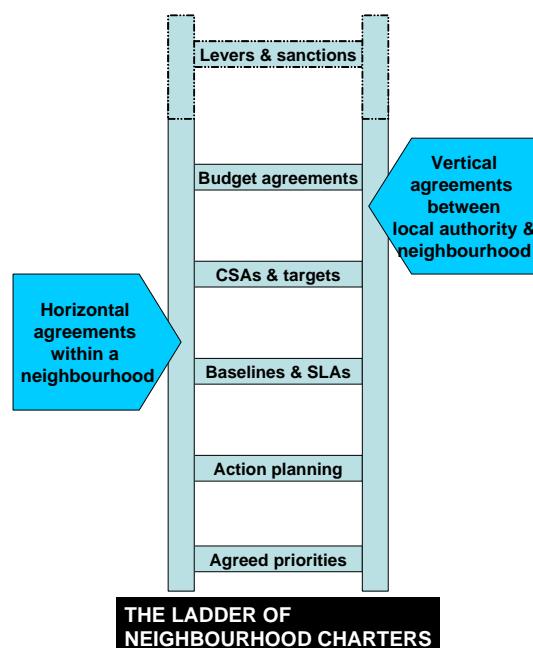
Any neighbourhood governance structure needs to reach out to the community, and the practices of engagement employed may be similar regardless of its internal character. Occasionally power may be more effectively and responsively deployed direct, or engagement may be more effective when it crosses the levels and silos of structured governance. Innovation and best practice can often have a greater impact on the processes of governance than with respect to its concrete institutions, which require greater medium or long-term stability.

There is much existing good practice in the UK, from Planning for Real exercises to parish charters and community chests. This section simply provides brief sketches on a few key issues where innovation may be desirable. We will return to this as the Transforming Neighbourhoods programme at the Young Foundation focuses increasingly on processes and practices in the coming months.

### Charters, contracts and agreements

Discussions about charters, contracts and triggers are often confused, because people are talking about very different things without realising it. Charters may, like parish charters, involve vertical agreements between local authorities and neighbourhood governance bodies about who does what, including the delegation of budgets and responsibilities in the context of clear service baselines. Or they may be horizontal agreements between partners in a neighbourhood, including the police, the PCT, the school, community groups, even neighbours.

Particularly in the horizontal case, there is a ladder of issues which could be agreed upon and included in a charter, ranging from a simple agreement on local priorities up to service level agreements, targets for improvement, community service agreements under which the community itself takes on responsibilities, neighbourhood budgeting, even (and at present exceptionally) teeth in the form of levers and sanctions to enforce these charters. Whatever national framework is



proposed should draw on this ladder of options, enabling areas around the country which have put in place some of the building blocks of neighbourhood charters to develop from the basis of their efforts so far, rather than requiring them to reinvent the wheel.

Some argue that the term charter is too redolent of a rights-based approach, that it should only be used where there is no-one to speak for the neighbourhood, and that in general we should be talking instead about “agreements”. While there is little return on semantics, it may be that even where a neighbourhood body exists, the word “charter” is appropriate. It is important that neighbourhood arrangements are not simply paper agreements between professionals involved in the mirrored maze of governance, but that people in neighbourhoods can find their place and feel a stake in them. Vertical charters for the whole of an authority area may include rights and responsibilities of all citizens in neighbourhoods, such as the power to trigger action. There are important questions nonetheless about who takes on responsibilities on behalf of the community, in particular in the context of community service agreements. Furthermore, too much contractualisation of local partnership working could breed animosity and conflict, rather than a virtuous circle of trust and collaboration. But in most neighbourhoods the problem is the reverse: no-one yet knows what they can expect of each other.

## **Triggers**

There has in recent months been a great deal of policy discussion around “triggers”, understood as ways for people and groups in neighbourhoods to force a neglected issue onto the agenda of public services and require them to deal with it. Understood thus, triggers are a blunt instrument to drive greater service responsiveness and culture change. It has been rightly observed that the metaphor is an unfortunate one, in particular in areas with high gun crime.

A community safety trigger has been designed for the forthcoming bill: under it a group can take a problem to the ward councillor if it has not been satisfactorily tackled through the ordinary channels for raising grievances. The councillor will then use her judgement, consult and investigate, and as a last resort escalate the issue to scrutiny (potentially involving a member of the police authority) to decide on a recommended action. There will be no requirement to follow the recommendation, but responses to triggers will be considered as part of any performance assessment.

This seems broadly acceptable to partners such as the police, but is cumbersome, slow and reliant on a small number of gatekeepers, who in some places may be involved in community conflicts. We would recommend that an elected neighbourhood representative such as a parish councillor should also be permitted to accept an issue raised by the community and to carry it through to principal council scrutiny if necessary (they may in fact already be able to do so by means of parish polls). We would also urge neighbourhood inquiries to be encouraged as a swifter and lighter tool of local scrutiny in these cases.

But for good reason, it is not yet clear to most people how triggers fit into the broader landscape of neighbourhood arrangements, or how they can be useful in solving real practical problems. The community safety trigger would be a Kafkaesque response to the oft-cited problem of “the fridge in the hedge”. We will offer more detailed thoughts soon on this. For now, we would observe that to focus on “triggers” is to miss the wood for the trees.

What is desired is a framework for neighbourhood service provision and governance which is accountable, responsive and capable of tackling problems. If we want to help achieve this, we need to start at the beginning, not the end of the design process: to consider how citizens can find out who to raise an issue with, how funds can be made available to solve problems in a responsive fashion, how citizens can influence public service priorities through charters, contracts or participatory planning processes, and finally what to do when things go wrong.

Different problems will require different responses. The fridge in the hedge demands a mechanism for rapid disposal. Unhappiness with an overall strategy – say, youth services or policing – requires an ongoing process of investigation and influencing, perhaps through a neighbourhood inquiry. There may be a place for petitions. Unhappiness with performance levels may suggest recourse to a regulator. Solving local problems is seldom a mechanistic “fire-and-forget” challenge. Individuals and groups need effective champions and responsive systems most of all.

Instead of triggers, we should be designing powers for people in neighbourhoods: the power to hold neighbourhood services to account, demand explanations and recommend solutions; the power to influence their priorities and budgets; the power to identify a problem and sort it out yourself or have it sorted; the power to find out what’s happening and who’s responsible.

### **Participatory budgeting**

There has recently been considerable interest in the model of participatory budgeting pursued in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, which builds from participatory neighbourhood assemblies to a city-wide plan for specific budget areas from the bottom up. It began modestly, with small capital budgets and several hundred participants, but now involves tens of thousands of citizens every year and has extended to health and other areas. The model is carefully designed to encourage participants to gain in confidence, to learn through doing, gradually to transcend parochial interests and take responsibility. It does so by giving them real decision-making power, also enabling them to make mistakes. Other cities around the world have taken up the model, often with variations which have diluted its positive impact. There is also a long parallel history of participation in budget decision-making in the US and even in the UK.

A handful of pilots are presently being run very quietly in the UK in places such as Salford and Harrow. They suffer from tentativeness, understandable in this risk-averse and financially-constrained governance environment. Real

co-governance power seems not yet to be involved. A stronger steer from government that this approach is desirable, and the offer of accompanying freedoms and flexibilities, could help encourage a bolder approach. The costs also need to be quantified better.

There are a very wide range of approaches that could be taken to participatory budgeting, including ones which might involve the range of local public services. The police or the PCT might even identify very small neighbourhood budgets over which decision-making would be done on a dual-key basis with neighbourhoods, helping to gain their trust through real power in partnership.

### **Civic media**

One of the oft-neglected aspects of neighbourhood governance is the hyper-local public sphere – the spaces for information, discussion and the sharing of issues. This might once have been facilitated through family networks and doorstep chat, but today different frameworks are required. The rise of network technologies, including spreading internet and mobile phone penetration, means we can construct new infrastructure. While thus far the web has been most effective in bringing together globally dispersed communities, GPS technology, social software and open technologies such as GoogleMaps are opening up new possibilities for local civic media and social networking. The Young Foundation is working in particular with MySociety.org on map-based technologies to enable people to record and discuss neighbourhood issues, events and local history. There seems no reason why these technologies should not begin to be integrated with public authorities' intelligence and response systems.

### **Other processes**

There is considerable potential to be explored in a range of other practices and processes, including:

- Community rights to buy, drawing on the Scottish and US models but extending to urban areas and moving beyond the speculative model
- Petitions, initiative and referendum processes and parish polls
- Innovations around the presentation and gathering of neighbourhood data
- Local markets and exchanges, for instance for slivers of time, lawnmowers, video or car rental, babysitting or nursing
- Supermajorities in decision-making processes, given that broad consensus is generally advisable at neighbourhood level

Over the coming months, further papers on some of these issues will follow from the Young Foundation.

## **THE ROLES AND POWERS OF NEIGHBOURHOODS**

In principle, people in neighbourhoods and neighbourhood bodies should have maximum power compatible with the principles of subsidiarity, efficiency and the general good. This will exclude many functions, and there are almost no issues within the likely remit of neighbourhoods on which some form of oversight by higher bodies will not be desirable. But in the case of many neighbourhood issues, that oversight can be broad, strategic and risk-based – “lean-back” – rather than operational, managerial or “lean-forward”.

There are strong arguments for giving neighbourhoods powers to influence a wide range of authorities and service providers where the issue is salient and susceptible to action. The table overleaf offers a very indicative framework for assessing what roles and powers would be appropriate, though this will also be influenced by the differing capacity of local arrangements and institutions.

ASSESSMENT OF NEIGHBOURHOOD ISSUES BY CRITERIA	Effects both salient and susceptible to action at very local level	Variety of provision acceptable or desirable	Community intelligence and scrutiny valuable	State or community role more central than private sector	Co-production of services and outcomes possible	Collective choice or pressure can generate added value	Few economies of scale	Community conflicts manageable	Broad strategic oversight sufficient on issues of inequality	POSSIBLE ROLES AND POWERS
Neighbourhood policing and community safety	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	?	X	Influence priorities, challenge, scrutinise, trigger action, co-produce, co-decision?
Street cleaning, street scene & wardens	√	√	√	√	√	√	?	√	√	From influencing priorities to triggering action or direct responsibility
Green and open spaces	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	?	From influencing priorities and co-production to direct responsibility, even ownership
Playgrounds	√	√	√	√	√	√	X	√	X	From influencing priorities to direct responsibility and co-production
Youth services	√	√	√	√	√	√	?	√	X	From influencing priorities to responsibility for neighbourhood delivery
Public health	√	?	√	√	√	√	X	√	X	Influencing and co-production, some community delivery
Neighbourhood management and partnership action planning	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	Neighbourhood dimension of broader authority strategy
Traffic calming	√	?	√	√	?	√	X	?	X	Influencing priorities, setting up home zones
Strategic planning and land use	X	X	√	√	√	?	X	X	X	Petition and proposal
Small-scale planning and land use	√	?	?	√	√	√	?	?	?	Constructive proposals, specification, determining part of planning gain?
Primary schools	√	X	√	√	√	√	X	?	X	Influence priorities?
Extended schools or colleges	√	√	√	√	√	√	?	√	?	Ensure access, partnerships in community learning?
Early years provision	√	√	√	?	√	?	?	√	X	Co-production, mutual aid, influencing priorities and provision
Social and affordable housing	√	?	?	√	√	√	X	?	X	Influencing priorities and provision, community management or development
Community centres and neighbourhood hubs	√	√	√	?	√	?	?	√	X	Management, ownership, influencing priorities, ensuring access
Local information	√	√	√	?	√	√	√	√	√	Provision, commissioning etc
Waste and recycling	√	?	√	?	√	√	X	√	√	Local delivery
Local retail and third spaces	√	√	√	X	√	√	X	√	X	Support of social businesses; planning
Workspace	?	√	√	X	√	√	?	√	?	Support of social businesses; planning
Welfare-to-work	√	X	√	?	√	√	X	√	X	Mutual aid & community-based enterprise?
Leisure facilities	?	√	√	?	√	√	X	?	X	Influence or decide priorities
Social care	√	X/?	√	√	√	?	X	?	X	Some co-production or local delivery possible, with strong oversight

## KEY

X Criterion not met

√ Criterion generally met

? Further consideration required

## **SOME ISSUES FOR FUTURE CONSIDERATION**

The ideas presented in this discussion paper are in the form of an indicative draft, and there is substantially more thinking to be done. In the coming months the policy community needs to firm up a menu of options which can be pursued within existing frameworks, and to establish what needs to be done to evolve those frameworks over the next year or two. The concept of *real powers for people in neighbourhoods to improve their quality of life* should guide the whole agenda. We need to consider what the key policy decisions are, and what if anything is excluded at this point.

Key questions will include:

- What monitoring, risk management and regulation framework/s might be appropriate for neighbourhoods, and which roles might be played by local, national, public or independent bodies?
- How could the LAA process be developed in a neighbourhood direction, and to include other service providers – even moving toward “Area Budgets”? What is the right combination of influencing the mainstream and small enabling budgets?
- Beyond legislation and governance frameworks, what capacity-building frameworks and tools can help people in thousands of neighbourhoods countrywide take up new powers and make a difference?
- How can these opportunities be marketed through partnership with civic organisations across the country, and how can this non-partisan social movement best gather pace?





**The Young Foundation** is a unique organisation that undertakes research to identify and understand social needs and then develops practical initiatives and institutions to address them. The Transforming Neighbourhoods programme is a research and innovation consortium on neighbourhood governance and empowerment. It brings together government departments, local authorities, community and research organisations including the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the Home Office, the Local Government Association, the Improvement and Development Agency, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Community Development Foundation, the Commission on Architecture and the Built Environment, Birmingham, Camden, Lewisham, Liverpool, Newham, Sheffield, Surrey and Wiltshire.

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