



# **RENEWING NEIGHBOURHOOD DEMOCRACY**

Creating powerful communities

By Joe Fyans and Callin McLinden

# About Localis

## Who we are

We are a leading, independent think tank that was established in 2001. Our work promotes neo-localist ideas through research, events and commentary, covering a range of local and national domestic policy issues.

## Neo-localism

Our research and policy programme is guided by the concept of neo-localism. Neo-localism is about giving places and people more control over the effects of globalisation. It is positive about promoting economic prosperity, but also enhancing other aspects of people's lives such as family and culture. It is not anti-globalisation, but wants to bend the mainstream of social and economic policy so that place is put at the centre of political thinking.

In particular our work is focused on four areas:

- **Decentralising political economy.** Developing and differentiating regional economies and an accompanying devolution of democratic leadership.
- **Empowering local leadership.** Elevating the role and responsibilities of local leaders in shaping and directing their place.
- **Extending local civil capacity.** The mission of the strategic authority as a convener of civil society; from private to charity sector, household to community.
- **Reforming public services.** Ideas to help save the public services and institutions upon which many in society depend.

## What we do

We publish research throughout the year, from extensive reports to shorter pamphlets, on a diverse range of policy areas. We run a broad events programme, including roundtable discussions, panel events and an extensive party conference programme. We also run a membership network of local authorities and corporate fellows.

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# Advisory Panel

This research project was supported by an advisory panel, whose members are listed below. Advisory panelists all gave interviews on the key themes of the report. They may not necessarily agree with the analysis and recommendations in the report.

- **Mr Ben Lee**  
Director, Shared Intelligence
- **Ms Alison McKenzie-Folan**  
Chief Executive, Wigan Council
- **Mr Cormac Russell**  
Author & Managing Director, Nurture Development
- **Ms Asra Shakoor**  
Specialist Editorial Advisor to the Secretary of State at Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government
- **Mr Bob Thust**  
Director, Social Innovation Company Ltd & Treasurer,  
The Bevy Community Pub
- **Ms Gayle Wallace**  
Director, G.W. Training & Consultancy Ltd
- **Mr Joe Wills**  
Senior Researcher, Centre for London

# Foreword

A nation cannot hope to recover or enjoy peace if its citizens are overwhelmed by anxiety and feelings of helplessness. At the time of writing, the country is about to enter a second nationwide lockdown, before we have really had the chance to understand and draw lessons from the first.

One lesson is already clear, however: when it comes to protecting the vulnerable and generating hope across the country, the local and the communal must be mobilised and prioritised above the central, the top down and the anonymous.

Communities have no need to 'step out of the shadows' for the sake of a national media narrative of hope and self-help. They are already scripting innumerable individual stories and rewriting countless destinies in ordinary life. As they have been doing day in and day out since long before the present crisis.

If this is to be a moment of transformation, in the face of the overwhelming health, economic and social impacts of COVID-19, we must learn that the antidote to helplessness and anxiety is community empowerment and courage.

We have seen the vital role ordinary people play in banding together in a shared commitment to protect others using their own or shared assets when all else at other levels fails. We must build on this now, providing local communities with the support they need to develop greater genuine autonomy and control over their own lives and local areas.

Empowering and encouraging communities to take on social assets and infrastructure and deliver crucial local services should now come centre stage for policymakers. But this must be accompanied with an investment in social capital, strengthening the institutions, skills, trust and networks necessary for communities to realise fully their potential to help themselves.

This means the value of subsidiarity and double devolution must be at the heart of the Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper. The paper must be the first step in producing a route map to community power that avoids the mistakes of previous community policy, which all too often has left behind those communities without existing capacity to engage.

For the potential of the Levelling Up agenda and the billions about to be spent on infrastructure '*grands projets*' to connect and mobilise will come to naught if these do not improve the amenities and lived experience of ordinary people. In 'left behind' areas, which are still playing catch up from the structural shifts of four decades ago, there must be parallel investment in social infrastructure and economic support.

We should also learn from recent history and the previous attempts to push down power to community level that have been frustrated by bureaucracy and high bars to entry and participation. We must not bury the principle of subsidiarity in administrative complexity and unreasonable expectations of time, money and expertise from those communities that would most benefit from empowerment. Can the promise of double devolution be realised through a

flatpack approach which capable people everywhere can make their own?

As the report that follows shows, we can learn much from successful domestic initiatives and from international examples. There are key principles for effective community empowerment: a relational approach in the interaction between local authorities and communities; strong networking systems, with clear points of contact; capacity building in financial and social capital; and the strengthening of community institutions able to access resources independently of local government.

The Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper is a huge opportunity to restore the golden thread of community solidarity, to retie the bonds between people, place and identity, advancing progress made since the passing of the Localism Act in 2011. But something vital is at stake here. Unless it considers how we lay the foundations for strong and empowered communities, the Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper risks providing recovery without resilience and devolution without localism. We can, shall and must build back better than this.

**Jonathan Werran**  
Chief Executive, Localis

# Executive Summary

## The meaning of community power

The effects of lockdown and the massive strain placed on public services throughout 2020 have led to a renewed focus on local response, on the resilience and ingenuity displayed on a volunteer basis across the country. This report looks at initiatives to increase the power of communities and strengthen neighbourhood-level democracy. An area of particular interest is post-pandemic reform to local governance structures in England, embodied in the forthcoming Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper, and how these reforms can open up space for greater community power. The report sets out recommendations which build on the recent 'Levelling Up Our Communities' report as well as other solutions proven effective in practice. Its methodology is a combination of qualitative research – case studies, interviews and surveys – and critical analysis of how community empowerment has been approached nationwide.

Decentralisation of power currently held in Westminster is key to both local government and local communities gaining more autonomy. Yet power is more than simply a function of the location of government decision-making – whether local or national. Undoubtedly, government policy must contain provisions that increase the autonomy and participation of communities. But it must also recognise the value that comes from community self-organisation as a good in itself.

Communities in England, particularly those in deprived areas, face a multitude of challenges to and restrictions upon their ability to take control of their own destiny. Weak and weakening social infrastructure, complex bureaucratic structures, poor connectivity and a history of ever-changing, overlapping initiatives all act as barriers to neighbourhood democracy. This is particularly problematic now, at a time where the ability for communities to act with autonomy at the hyperlocal level could not be more important. The pandemic has shone a light on how reliant we are on this social infrastructure locally. It has also demonstrated how vital community involvement is to the functionality of social infrastructure, and how effective communities can be in providing crucial services. However, the COVID-19 crisis has also shown the extent to which a reliance on communities stepping up to take responsibility for themselves has limits, not least the extent to which responses community by community often reflected the pre-existing civic capacity of communities as the pandemic hit.

## The current opportunity

We are moving towards a reformation of English local governance, to be laid out in early 2021 with publication of the Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper. Recently, particularly in the context of COVID-19 recovery, actions and rhetoric from the government have seemed to suggest that they are partially

informed by a subsidiarity principle, with a series of moves towards hyperlocal legitimisation. From piecemeal shifts toward community power from successive governments and the emergence of many models and organisational structures, a clearing is opening up for communities to build their own capacity to govern independently of traditional structures. Expanding this space further, whilst refining and contextualising models of community control, power and organisation could help to maximise local participation and improve quality of life across the country.

Community spirit rose greatly in the early months of lockdown, concurrent with the rise in community action. At the same time, the national emergency required an entirely different fiscal approach from the government, one that already seemed prepared to abandon austerity to some degree. With the International Monetary Fund urging against any austerity in response to the pandemic, and the British Medical Association among others linking austerity directly to the severity of the pandemic's impact, the political-economic case against austerity is currently made by a broad and diverse coalition. There is an opportunity in this moment to embed community autonomy through legislation and provide resources to those communities in need.

On 23 June 2020, the prime minister asked Danny Kruger MP to review and put forward proposals for how charities, communities and the third sector might build on their successes so far and aid the COVID-19 recovery effort. Reporting in September 2020, Kruger highlighted the willingness to collaborate and showcased the community spirit brought on by the pandemic. The report recommended a suite of new measures to understand and track the contribution to the national economy of civil society and provide funding to community organisations. The Government response was somewhat muted, with a response from the prime minister that was non-committal in policy terms. However, the pandemic and its effects are far from over, and communities across the country are likely to once again be asked to step up in the name of national resilience over winter 2020/21, with a one-moth national lockdown announced on 31<sup>st</sup> October. As we once again look to our local communities to provide crucial networks of support and service delivery, the need for a fairer settlement going forward is clear.

## Recent history

The early years of New Labour were accompanied by a raft of legislation around devolution and decentralisation, ostensibly aimed at empowering communities. The primary criticism of these early schemes – that the rhetoric of localism could not sway the desire to control and monitor all levels of policy, would continually dog community power initiatives under New Labour. In 2008, just as the global financial crisis hijacked the policy agenda, a Community Empowerment White Paper was published. The white paper failed, however, to address issues of structure, complexity and accessibility of the public sector to civil society, in themselves complicated by the overlapping initiatives of the preceding decade. The need to simplify and a desire to cut through to civil society partially underpinned the advent in the 2010s of the 'Big Society', promoted as a drive towards devolving power to localities and their communities.

In 2011, the Localism Act afforded communities three new "community rights", all of which are, to varying extents, important legislative tools in the broader goal of creating powerful communities. Since then, central government has

embarked intermittently on a policy of community integration, coalescing around the idea of strong mutual commitments and responsibilities whilst emphasising the shared aspirations, values and experiences of local residents. The conversation around the Big Society agenda remains polarised, with much debate as to its underlying rationale. Looking beyond the motivation however, a concrete result has been the proliferation of community ownership of local assets through the Community Rights empowered by the Localism Act. Community Asset Transfers have empowered volunteer groups, but the success of the policy overall has been limited due to severe capacity constraints in the context in which it tends to be implemented. The mixed results of the policy are example *par excellence* of the need to combine the devolution of power to communities alongside resources for the kind of capacity-building needed to bring those left behind parts of the country along.

## Models from abroad

Since the financial crisis, particularly in Europe, political devolution has become something of an international trend as governments find themselves forced to experiment, in the face of democratic pressures and austere budget cuts, with new approaches to the role which the state, both national and local, should play in relation to the communities they serve. One such approach is 'new municipalism', characterised by a focus on establishing common goals and ascertaining through participation the priorities of local residents. This approach can play an important role in building the power base of communities, enabling them to become more functionally effective. In practice, the model has produced some thought-provoking strategies and results, increasing input from local communities into the management of public assets and delivery of public assets. The approach has its limitations, however, often faced with major institutional challenges. Attempting to merge the concerns of communities with the complexities of governance can be transformative, but this is by no means guaranteed. Another international model, participatory budgeting is an effective way to involve communities in decision-making and facilitate their power. It is a local policy with its roots in Latin America which has been trialled in the Netherlands and several other EU countries in recent years. In Porto Alegre, Brazil, the deliberative and inclusive nature of the budgeting process has been linked to favourable environmental and social outcomes such as greatly increasing access to clean water and expanding and upgrading the city's waste management system.

However, these examples also rely on a vision of "extending" local government out to the community, embedding the community within the local state bureaucracy. It is not clear that either – founded in models of governance very different to our own – provide models that resonate or reflect the history or culture of the UK. Rather than attempt to import models wholesale, it is important to look at those lessons which have been learned which might be instructive for UK policy. Looking ahead for community power in the UK, these elements might be looked at as crucial to capacity building. Expanding the role of the citizen can help bring a broader understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the council, at the same time bringing together residents at the neighbourhood level as part of the process. Particularly in areas with little social infrastructure in terms of community organisations and networks, this kind of process can help build capacity across multiple domains – building social capital and trust within the

community whilst also creating more effective channels of communication with local government.

## Where we are now

Hyperlocal, community-based activity is vibrant in the UK, and there are 'over-ready' policy proposals to support and expand the sector. A recent report from NCVO found nearly 13,000 non-profit organisations operating at the local community or neighbourhood level not identifiable through other sources. The breadth of community activities which emerge where this support exists is evidenced, for example, in the experience of Big Local neighbourhoods across England over the last few years. Established by the National Lottery Community Fund in 2012, the Big Local programme has given 150 'left behind' areas £1m each to spend as the community decides over a 15-year period. An idea in this vein gathering steam is the proposal for 'pop-up parishes'. These would be temporary, hyperlocal institutions that are established to tackle specific local issues and develop the area of control. The concept was endorsed in the Kruger report, with funding suggested through a 'top-slice' from the Stronger Towns Fund and Shared Prosperity Fund – with the money to be given without conditions attached, potentially avoiding some of the bureaucracy of previous policy. Looking at case studies in detail illustrate further policy priorities for creating powerful communities.

## Case studies

The case studies in the appendix to this report look at recent initiatives in the UK aimed at overcoming previous policy failures and instances from abroad where some of the emerging models have been applied. They indicate where there may be opportunities to open up local government reform to double devolution, how this might be done and what pitfalls are to be avoided. From the studies, some key principles for creating powerful communities can be drawn:

- A relational approach to governance.
- Strong networking and communication systems.
- Dedication to building capacity.
- Work rooted in listening to communities
- A willingness to cede some power and control
- A culture that is engaged and facilitative

Empowering communities requires government, both central and local, to adopt a broad change in mindset – from administrative to relational. An example of putting a relational mindset into practice would be for local authorities to strive towards making their decision-making processes more participatory for communities. This may appear to be an impractical suggestion in the UK, but as the approach of Wigan Council has demonstrated, having this mindset embedded in the approach, training and strategy of local authorities can lead to more holistic practices on the ground. Strong systems for social networking and connecting with the local authority are present across our case studies. Creating and sustaining powerful communities is an easier task when community organisation is well connected both to the local authority and to the wider ecosystem of local action.

Finally, resourcing is of course crucial, both in terms of financial resources and broader elements of capacity. The revenue support for social infrastructure of neighbourhoods; parks, libraries, pubs, hubs and the like is a key priority across our studies. Perhaps the most striking elements of our case studies are those where the local state is entirely facilitative, providing resource and advice for communities to act autonomously. This can be achieved if capacity is built, social infrastructure resourced and, in the first instance, the networks of communication between council and community are strengthened. These are the conditions that must be in place for a meaningful transfer of power in any aspect of community life and local governance. In the upcoming reforms to the system in England, there is an opportunity to embed these conditions.

### The Devolution and Planning White Papers

The Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper is a chance to set out how councils can facilitate communities to self-empower. The white paper could, if ambitious enough, make explicit the role of local government as part of a facilitative local state, where autonomy and self-empowerment are enabled as a matter of process. To do so, the route to double devolution for local communities must be clearly laid out in the final legislation resulting from the white paper and ensuing debate. The importance of clear lines of communication has been a recurring theme throughout this report, and any reform to local government in England would do well to give statutory heft to this principle by making it a requirement of local authorities.

Beyond this, there are options available to begin charting the course to neighbourhood democracy. The paper is an opportunity to begin a discussion on community power in service delivery and set out the process for situations where communities are willing and able to design and deliver local services – either in partnership with the council or autonomously. Extending the parish council powers first established under New Labour, to include the right for communities to form ‘pop-up parishes’ would be a major step towards creating a facilitative local state. The paper also has the potential to lay the groundwork for the Kruger report’s recommendation of a Community Power Act which allows third sector organisations and charities to carry out elements of service delivery, by enshrining and delineating the facilitative role of the local state.

At the very least, the white paper presents an opportunity to redress some of the issues with previous legislation and provide an evidence-based update to the Localism Act 2011. The onus previously placed on communities to come together and save local spaces should be replaced by one of assumed protection, with the public sector in the position of justifying the removal of an asset. Whilst potentially beyond the purview of the white paper, the establishment of a community wealth fund, which has been called for by multiple organisations across sectors, would be a suitable companion to a genuine programme of double devolution.

A wealth fund for communities would begin to deal with the issue of financial capacity, however there is also the issue of that capacity which comes with social capital – particularly pressing in the realm of planning. Neighbourhood plans are rightly reinforced in the paper, but the need to build local capacity to engage with the process must be stressed if the policy is to deliver true community control. Along with proposed changes to the Community Infrastructure Levy, failing to legislate for capacity building at the neighbourhood level risks repeating the

mistake of previous community-focused policy: leaving behind communities without significant resources.

### Policy recommendations

- **The Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper should codify the role of councils in a facilitative local state by beginning the process of creating clear, statutory pathways to community autonomy.**
  - The white paper should identify areas of service delivery that could be co-designed, run in partnership or devolved entirely to the neighbourhood-level, particularly if the size of local authorities is to increase with reforms.
  - A statutory role should be created in local authorities for managing double devolution and community relations, to act as a single point of contact and information for community groups looking to establish forms of local control.
  - Building on previous work from London Councils and Danny Kruger MP, the ‘pop-up parish’ or Community Improvement District model should be extended as a statutory community right alongside the previous rights established in the Localism Act 2011.
  - Pathways should be developed for communities to take control of non-core service spending at neighbourhood level through initiatives like the People’s Budget in Frome.
- **To enshrine the principle of double devolution and expand upon the Localism Act’s establishment of Community Rights, the Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper should extend these rights to give the community greater power over local assets and social infrastructure.**
  - All assets that qualify as having community value under the current system should be designated as social infrastructure.
  - If a community group decides to take on a community asset, they should be supported, both procedurally and financially, in their endeavours to do so.
- **The introduction of localised lockdowns has further emphasised the importance of front-line action from community groups. The government should urgently renew and extend financial support for voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations to respond to the pandemic, particularly as the reintroduction of lockdown measures escalates.**
  - To ensure fast and targeted response, a fund could be distributed to community organisations by local councils in lockdown areas in a manner similar to the distribution of the pandemic-related Small Business Grant Fund

- As with the Small Business Grant Fund, the focus should be on rescue at any cost for the sake of national resilience, and the overall fund should be matched to need rather than to a specific cash limit.
- **In order to strengthen social infrastructure, and properly resource endeavours to empower communities in a manner that is participatory and gets results, central government should commit to establishing a Community Wealth Fund.**
  - The fund would specifically target the social and civic infrastructure of 'left behind' neighbourhoods across the country. It would be an independent endowment that would be distributed over the course of 10-15 years, include investment at the hyperlocal level, decision-making would be community-led and, as part of the package, support would be provided in order to build and sustain the social capital of communities and their capacity to be involved. Recently, this call for a hyperlocal focused funding of £2bn was echoed by Danny Kruger MP in his proposal for a 'Levelling Up Communities Fund'.

# 1. Introduction

## **Purpose/aims of paper**

The United Kingdom is facing disruption in its economy and governance as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and its socio-economic fallout, in a way more severe perhaps than any other developed nation<sup>1</sup>. The effects of lockdown and the massive strain placed on public services throughout 2020 have led to a renewed focus on local response, on the resilience and ingenuity displayed on a volunteer basis across the country to hold together a social fabric stretched taut under extreme duress. This report looks at initiatives to increase the power of communities and strengthen neighbourhood-level democracy at this historic juncture, to understand how initiatives to strengthen community power and control as a means of achieving a better functioning local democracy and political economy might work in practice. An area of particular interest is post-pandemic reform to local governance structures in England, embodied in the forthcoming Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper, and how these reforms can open up space for greater community power.

The report discusses how to renew democracy at the neighbourhood level and sets out recommendations which build on the recent 'Levelling Up Our Communities' report from Danny Kruger MP as well as other solutions proven effective in practice. The report explores approaches to community empowerment past and present, what has worked, what barriers stand in the way and what changes are needed to the policy environment now for it to bring communities into the fold more effectively and deepen local democracy. Its methodology is a combination of qualitative research – case studies, interviews and surveys – and critical analysis of how community empowerment has been approached nationwide.

At its core, this report seeks to understand the current state of community empowerment in the UK and what changes should be made to ensure that the state – both local and central – can best support all communities to prosper and thrive. In conclusion, the report prescribes some immediate policy approaches that could facilitate community empowerment and some more general principles to take forward in both national and local government.

## **Defining and explaining community power**

Broadly, community power is the participation and organisation of everyday people in the governance of each other and others within a given community, for the mutual benefit of all. This governance is often carried out in a

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<sup>1</sup> BBC News (2020) – Coronavirus: UK worst hit among major economies

cooperative and collaborative manner that emphasises self-sufficiency and local determination, with strong hyperlocal institutions, and independent of official government structures. Community power is a broad concept that can take many different forms and encompasses a number of movements, initiatives and projects. Typically, it is characterised as either ‘filling a gap’ or advocating for change where local, regional or national governments have in some way failed. However, community power can also be seen as reflecting growth in self-efficacy where the need for state intervention has decreased as a result of the improvements to quality of life associated with stronger institutions and greater trust within communities.

What defines a ‘local community’ in spatial and relational terms varies, but in the hyperlocal sense discussed in this report and its case studies, ‘community-level’ and ‘neighbourhood-level’ are often interchangeable terms. Neighbourhoods are the home to associational life at the local level.

*“An association is the amplifier and the multiplier of individual citizen power. You may have a beautiful solo voice, but you’ll never be a choir on your own”*

**– Advisory panel member**

This report will focus its attention on activity, places and spaces at a neighbourhood geographic scale. In terms of population size, neighbourhoods in England are often roughly coterminous with wards, which had an average population of around 7000 people at the last census<sup>2</sup>. Defining communities in a local geography may be relatively simple but the question of what it means to devolve power to communities, and how it can be done best, is less straightforward. As this report will show, there have been multiple attempts to empower communities at this hyperlocal level over the past two decades in Britain, with decidedly mixed results.

An evaluation of recent national approaches to neighbourhood governance in England, which looked at neighbourhoods in Milton Keynes, deduced that many of the initiatives that were state-led failed to deliver a notable improvement, even given the UK government’s own definition of ‘empowerment’<sup>3</sup>. Most effective were bottom-up, community-run, ‘self-help projects’ that were state enabled – in that these ‘provide[d] an opportunity to create the spaces where there is potential for transformation’<sup>4</sup>. Building on the findings of the Milton Keynes study, our advisory panel interviews identified three broad principles in the UK context for an empowered community, defined spatially by the neighbourhood within which they live and socialise.

- **Autonomy:** residents are able to define the problems or possibilities of their neighbourhoods freely and are facilitated in pursuing them.
- **Participation:** residents are brought into the fold of local decision-making in a manner that is genuinely democratic and consequential.
- **Results:** resident engagement with processes locally are reflected in tangible results for their neighbourhoods, with clearly defined pathways of accountability.

But power is more than simply a function of the location of government decision-

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<sup>2</sup> ONS (2012) – Ward level mid-year population estimates (experimental): Mid-2011 (census based))

<sup>3</sup> Bailey & Pill (2015) – Can the state empower communities through localism? An evaluation of recent approaches to neighbourhood governance in England

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

making – whether local or national. For the upcoming national reforms to governance to have a meaningful impact on community power, they must look beyond assumptions. Undoubtedly, government policy must contain provisions that increase the autonomy and participation of communities. It must also recognise the value that comes from community self-organisation as a good in itself. The upsurge of mutual aid which proved so crucial to national resilience in 2020 reflected levels of pre-existing community capacity – communities mobilised around rugby clubs and arts projects as much as in predefined emergency response committees. The tangible and valuable results that such activity has produced merits a clear recognition and reinforcement of community capacity to self-organise from national government.

### Subsidiarity and double devolution

*“If the question is ‘what do you want to be able to do with a group of your neighbours locally, and how can that be supported?’, then what needs to be done first is getting serious about putting the principle of subsidiarity front and centre in how government operates, and seeing that reflected in legislation.”*

**– Advisory panel member**

According to the principle of subsidiarity, the legitimisation of governance structures, the roles and responsibilities each tier of government has, should be a bottom-up, rather than top-down, process. Thus, subsidiarity is presupposed by a commitment to broad decentralisation and is rooted in the notion that state governments should assist and facilitate, not regulate or restrict, the autonomy of institutions in closest proximity to the lives of individuals - only intervening when the needs and preferences of individuals are failing to be met and satisfied<sup>5</sup>. Whilst subsidiarity is an admirable principle in theory, it is complex in practice on account of the many far-reaching variables, for both the country in question and the localities within it<sup>6</sup>. The old adage that British party leaders are localist in opposition and centralist in government is also true at local government level. There are many instances of councils coming into conflict with community groups in a similar power-dynamic to that which characterises strained central-local government relations.

Yet despite this tension, decentralisation of power currently held in Westminster is key to greater autonomy for local government and local communities. The future of powerful communities is in the space between the individual and the ecosystem of local governance structures. The need to create this space in the country’s institutional layout is the rationale behind calls for ‘double devolution’. This concept emerged in the mid-2000s, endorsed to some degree across the political spectrum, as a type of societal transformation involving opening up broad and rigid governance structures to bottom-up participation and influence<sup>7</sup>. The idea could not be more relevant now, given the epochal transformation and massive state expansion that have accompanied the pandemic.

*“I think legitimate power would be held centrally much more effectively if the local democracy was tended to and stewarded – it’s the old narrative;*

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<sup>5</sup> Follesdall (1998) – Subsidiarity

<sup>6</sup> Edveen, Gelauff & Pelkmans (2008) – Assessing Subsidiarity

<sup>7</sup> Hilder, (2006) – Power up, people Double devolution and beyond.

*you grow your power by giving it away. It really is about the willingness to practice subsidiarity at all levels.”*

**- Advisory panel member**

Double devolution is not necessarily about harmonious community/council relations, nor does it imply devolution first to the local authority, then to the community. With the right institutional conditions – particularly adequate financial resources and political commitment – the variations of service provision that decentralisation allows for can increase participation and lead to better and more innovative solutions to problems that may previously have bedevilled a uniform, centralised approach from national government<sup>8</sup>. If political, market and fiscal powers were devolved in the spirit of true decentralisation, local authorities could be held accountable for their successes and failures<sup>9</sup>. This would result in a much clearer assessment of what functions they are able to carry out effectively, and what functions may be best delegated upwards or taken on by communities. This principle is already applied to certain aspects of community assets and local planning. With a stronger and more coherent local government structure, the empowerment of communities could be rapidly scaled up. At its core, double devolution is an appeal to the principle of subsidiarity.

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<sup>8</sup> Robinson (2007) – Does decentralisation improve equity and efficiency in public service delivery provision?

<sup>9</sup> Polverari (2015) – Does Devolution Increase Accountability? Empirical Evidence from the Implementation of European Union Cohesion Policy

## Ladder of Participation

The term 'participation' is used by people from very different political and social backgrounds. Lack of conceptual clarity poses real risks. In local politics, 'participation' can mask manipulation. Clarity is paramount in any policy discussion or intervention claiming to make use of participatory approaches. It helps to understand what citizens do or what is done to them when they are encouraged to participate, to understand participation as something deeply political, and to retain the notion of rights and empowerment.

In analysing the case studies and international models, this report uses Arnstein's 'ladder of participation' to assess the level of genuine community autonomy. Arnstein's ladder is an often cited approach which describes the various forms that empowerment can take, highlighting the difference between optimal participation and more limited engagement. The ladder juxtaposes powerless citizens with the powerful in order to show the fundamental divisions between them.

At the bottom of the ladder are:

**1. Manipulation** and

**2. Therapy** which describe levels of non-participation, the objective of which is to enable power holders to educate participants, rather than enable people to participate in planning.

The next two rungs are levels of tokenism:

**3. Informing** and

**4. Consultation.**

Citizens can hear and be heard but lack the power to ensure their views will be considered. At this level, there is no follow-up, thus no assurance of changing the status quo.

**5. Placation** is a higher level of tokenism, allowing citizens to advise without the right to decide.

The final three rungs of the ladder are levels of citizen power with increasing degrees of decision-making influence.

**6. Partnership** enables negotiation and engagement in trade-offs with traditional power holders while at the highest rungs of

**7. Delegated** power and

**8. Citizen control**, citizens hold the majority of or full managerial and decision-making power.

The ladder reveals the gradations of citizen participation. This makes it possible to understand the increasingly vociferous demands for participation from citizens and the responses from power holders. The ladder can be applied in a variety of settings: the church; colleges and universities; national programmes such as urban planning. The underlying issues remain the same – how citizens elevate their power to make the target institutions responsive to their needs and views.

## Challenges to community power

To understand how policy in the wake of the pandemic can create space for community power, it is helpful to understand those factors that currently restrict it. The UK political and social context throws up many barriers to community empowerment. For one, the 'death of the high street'<sup>10</sup> and other damage to the social infrastructure<sup>11</sup> of neighbourhoods, towns and cities, has depleted social capital and community wealth. This feeds into the broader impasse of communities lacking the social or economic capacity to take on responsibilities. They are hindered by the need to understand existing organisational structures and regulatory frameworks, themselves often characterised by frustrating and unresponsive bureaucracy, leading to a sense of alienation from the political process. Community groups are closest to local issues on the ground, but all too often find themselves enmeshed in a web of convoluted local responsibility structures and having to engage in public relations battles with principal authorities. In practice, this creates more of a functional impasse than is necessary.

*"The community can often be very sceptical, often to do with their history of relationships with the local authority, various funding regimes compounded by their concerns about the usual suspects getting funding and us lowly people won't get a seat at the table"*

**- Advisory panel member**

Research from a report commissioned by Local Trust on so-called 'left-behind' communities found that a lack of social infrastructure, the absence of community engagement and participation, and poor connectivity to the broader, local economy affected the social and economic outcomes of deprived neighbourhoods significantly<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, sustained cuts in public spending in the wake of the financial crash dealt too heavy a blow for short-term, incremental, grant-style funding to make up the difference for the social infrastructure of our communities. Austerity measures in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis have seriously diminished the potential for strong council-community relations in a number of ways. Local authorities have been required to adopt budget cuts and a broad mindset of only funding the 'absolutely necessary' – with efforts to increase community power often falling by the wayside.

Of course, challenges to community power in many cases are rooted far deeper than the last decade of policy. In 'left behind' areas especially, deprivation and social issues have often left communities trapped in a cycle of slight improvement, followed by deterioration due to a lack of long-term strategy, sustained investment or innovation on the part of local authorities or other organisations. On the one hand, local authorities can regularly fail to respond quickly enough to community demands; repelling the interest of local people and causing tension between councils and the community. On the other, funding regimes and "community-driven" organisations can potentially create an unhelpful competitive environment that fragments communities and pits local priorities against one another<sup>13</sup>.

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10 Hubbard (2017) – The Battle for the High Street

11 Latham & Layton (2018) – Social infrastructure and the public life of cities: Studying urban sociality and public spaces

12 Local Trust (2019) - Left behind?: Understanding communities on the edge

13 John, Ward & Dowding (2004) – The Bidding Game: Competitive Funding Regimes and the Political Targeting of Urban Programme Schemes

Communities in England, particularly those in deprived areas, face a multitude of challenges to and restrictions upon their ability to take control of their own destiny. Weak and weakening social infrastructure, complex bureaucratic structures, poor connectivity and a history of ever-changing, overlapping initiatives all act as barriers to neighbourhood democracy. This is particularly problematic now, at a time where the ability for communities to act with autonomy at the hyperlocal level could not be more important.

### Attitudes to community power in planning

Central government and local authority approaches to community involvement in planning have been criticised, particularly in places where residents cannot commit large amounts of time on a voluntary basis<sup>14</sup>. The way in which localism has played out as a contested dynamic between communities and boroughs in London serves as a microcosm for how the potential for functionally effective community power is undermined by the attitudes of local government nationwide. As a Centre for London publication illustrates<sup>15</sup>, the London Mayor and boroughs see the recently devolved (and now reinforced) neighbourhood planning as a challenge to their own power. The development of the Mayor's London Plan began on the assumption that a traditional two-tier planning system still operated in the capital, ignorant of the fact that a "third tier" planning process had been growing since the 2011 Localism Act. In 2016, almost no London borough took advantage of the additional Community Infrastructure Levy available to local areas with a neighbourhood plan. Furthermore, in 2018, only one London borough, Lambeth, was meeting the legal requirements to provide its Statement of Community Involvement on how neighbourhood planning would be supported.

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14 Bailey (2015) – Housing at the neighbourhood level: a review of the initial approaches to neighbourhood development plans under the Localism Act 2011 in England

15 Centre for London (2019) - Act Local: Empowering London's Neighbourhoods

## 2. The need for community power now

*“It is important for councils to try and take a step back and rather than focus on what people are unable to do, let’s focus on what they can do; rather than go in and try to fix people, let’s go in and see what they want to happen, what their aspirations are. Endeavour to flip the conversation in all community engagement work to look at residents, not as a drain on resources or a problem to be solved, but to see them as assets and recognise the positivity and innovation they can bring to the table.”*

**– Advisory panel member**

In surveying the role that local organisation continues to play in shoring up society against the far-reaching effects of the pandemic, the national importance of community power is clearly evident. At the outset of the lockdown, highly localised mutual aid groups were mobilised and established all over the country, and about one million people volunteered to help with the pandemic response in the first two months<sup>16</sup>. At the neighbourhood level, there is regional evidence<sup>17</sup><sup>18</sup> that community spirit has increased in response to these difficult times. COVID-19 Mutual Aid UK is a network of mutual aid groups run by volunteers which provides resources for local groups and specific community issues as well as a map showing where the thousands of UK groups are distributed<sup>19</sup>. These groups formed a crucial part of the country’s social resilience in the first lockdown<sup>20</sup> and are likely to do so again as general and localised lockdowns bite through the winter 2020-21.

As the crisis has unfolded, there have been pockets of evidence to suggest that local authorities are embracing and placing more trust in the work of community groups, and parish councils have come to the fore as a level of governance between the hyperlocal and the local authority<sup>21</sup>. The pandemic has shone a light on our reliance on this social infrastructure locally. It has also demonstrated how vital community involvement is to the functionality of social infrastructure, and how effective communities can be in providing crucial services – often on a voluntary basis. Publications from Local Trust<sup>22</sup><sup>23</sup> and Locality<sup>24</sup> have illustrated

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16 Marston, Renedo & Miles – Community participation is crucial in a pandemic

17 Christian Aid (2020) – Increase in Welsh community spirit

18 NIHR (2020) – The UK COVID-19 lockdown prompted greater community spirit and involvement in neighbourhood life

19 COVID-19 Mutual Aid UK – Mutual Aid Groups Map

20 NHS Confederation (2020) – Volunteering and community spirit to respond to COVID-19

21 National Association of Local Councils (2020) – Case studies: Coronavirus

22 Local Trust (2020) – Community responses: blending formal and informal ways of working

23 Local Trust (2020) – Grassroots volunteering in 26 communities in response to COVID-19

24 Locality (2020) – We Were Built For This

the myriad of ways in which community groups have held together the country's social fabric on a volunteer basis.

There are clear examples of how parish councils have risen to the challenge at the neighbourhood level:

- Cottenham Parish Council has successfully organised 140 community volunteers to provide a number of services to residents in the area during the pandemic, including collecting medicines, staying in touch and grocery shopping.
- Crewe Town Council has supported 'virtual forums' so that residents, businesses and organisations have a direct line of support with the local authority and each other amidst the pandemic.
- A volunteer group, Midhurst Angels, helped set up by Midhurst Town Council in Sussex, has been responsible for putting the area's businesses, charities, community groups and residents in touch with each other. The council has also played a coordinating role in the delivery of food from local butchers, cafes and greengrocers whilst ensuring all volunteers are DBS checked and first-aid trained.

A recent report by Carnegie UK Trust<sup>25</sup> on how community hubs responded to COVID-19 has also provided some in-depth case studies:

- The Scarborough and District Community Hub is a product of a Community Support Organisation (CSO) mechanism established by the local council as a means of communicating to residents through public relations, raising awareness of the community hub and the support services that it can provide.
- In Renfrewshire, in the West of Scotland, seven neighbourhood hubs were set up and run in partnership between the local authority, health and social care entities and the third sector. The hubs were used to distribute food and medicine through local assistance teams, all established by the council overnight in recognition of the gap in support that the pandemic quickly illuminated.

However, the COVID-19 crisis has also shown the limitations of a reliance on communities to step up and take responsibility for themselves, not least in that responses often reflected the degree of pre-existing civic capacity as the pandemic hit. Deprived areas with low levels of social infrastructure received less than half the COVID-19 related funding per head than other equally deprived communities with a stronger social infrastructure. The areas without such infrastructure simply lacked the organisations and networks to apply for the funding. At the same time, the extent of the voluntary mutual aid activity that has defined many people's experience of the COVID crisis have been significantly lesser, in places more than 60 percent lower, in 'left behind' neighbourhoods<sup>26</sup>. These facts illustrate the danger of relying on a programme of community empowerment without simultaneously supporting the development of trusted, local civic institutions.

There is nevertheless immense potential for our communities to take responsibility for – and enjoy – a fuller functional role in the development of their local areas. However, this potential can only bear fruit if facilitated by

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25 Carnegie UK Trust (2020) – Pooling Together: How Community Hubs have responded to the COVID-19 Emergency

26 APPG for Left Behind Neighbourhoods (2020) – Communities at risk: the early impact of COVID-19 on 'left behind' neighbourhood

supportive and resourced social infrastructure. Strong social infrastructure, with communal, cultural, historical or natural significance for residents locally, not only enhances their wellbeing and quality of life but is fundamental in building social capital, resilience and trust in communities. At this critical juncture, there is a need for policy to delineate the functional role that communities can play – the areas in which local control is possible and desirable – and to lay out a path to resourcing community groups more effectively.

*“If you want to have a community that can genuinely step up, engage, fill gaps and so on, then they need to be resourced to define and determine their own future, and be able to put that into practice. This may include resourcing things that the government or local authority would not necessarily endorse normally but that is part of accepting the transfer of control towards genuine empowerment”*

**– Advisory panel member**

This is not a call for an identikit roll-out of lookalike community organisations in neighbourhoods across the country. For local institutions to succeed, they need to reflect the places in which they have been established. When the pandemic struck, it did not seem to matter much what the civic activities or institutions that existed in any particular community were in order for them to be able to respond, more that they were there. A recent Common Vision/Gulbenkian report on COVID-19, creativity and the arts, identified the value of community arts groups in stepping up to make a difference: “the fact that the [local art] groups exist as a fairly secure social entity that then allows it to be used in a time of crisis”<sup>27</sup>.

In other areas, different types of local organisations reinvented themselves to meet the pressing needs of their communities, repurposing networks and focusing on delivering solutions – whether a community sports club turning itself into a community kitchen or a volunteer-run community centre reorienting its activities to coordinate support for vulnerable people across the local area.

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<sup>27</sup> Macfarland, Agace & Hayes (2020) – Creativity, Culture and Connection: Responses from arts and culture organisations in the COVID-19 crisis

## COVID-19 International Case Study: Enabling Community-led Change in New Zealand

New Zealand is an island nation, with a small population and long experience of responding to natural disasters. Nevertheless, it is seen to have weathered the COVID-19 storm in a robust and efficient manner truly world-beating. The country's success in eliminating COVID-19 required not only effective leadership and prompt action by central government, but also the coordinated effort of thousands of local people around the country. Their response exemplifies the importance of community power in dealing with the crisis.

For Inspiring Communities, which has championed New Zealand's growing community-led development movement since 2008, one of the key lessons from COVID is just how much place matters and how transformational change becomes possible by building on the strengths, assets, context and wisdom held locally.

### How New Zealand responded

- **Key central government enablers of a locally led response**

included: clear messaging and expectations; a strong sense of shared purpose; enabling people to work differently; and adequate resourcing.

People were encouraged to work differently and "do what it takes", based on the best information at the time, to act quickly and develop, pivot, improve as they went along, acting on trust. This empowered way of working was evident from government agencies, local councils, businesses and NGOs.

Resourcing was available at the level needed, provided in fast and simplified ways with a high degree of trust. In addition to funds from government and charitable sources, new community resources were accessed and existing resources shared.

- **The success of local responses** drew upon existing assets and strengths, including strong leadership, trusted relationships and diverse connections. Communities came together quickly and delivered solutions that were generous, holistic and mobilised resources to enable an effective local systems response.

### Pre-COVID factors that boosted the speed and effectiveness of locally led responses:

- Depth and breadth of relationships and collaborative experience – trust and shared local knowledge of who was best to do what ensured help got to where it was most needed.
- Knowledge about strengths and resources (people and capacity) already in the community that could be connected and/or activated quickly.
- Access to online technology – enabled organisations and agencies to connect and services to be delivered in different ways.
- Previous crisis response experience – typically connections and organising 'know how' was higher in these communities.
- Local autonomy and self-reliance – particularly in rural and isolated communities where services are minimal, people activated their own networks and resources to get things done.

## An emergency in community funding

If the response has demonstrated the inherent power of communities in the face of the crisis, the pandemic and the social impacts of lockdown have had a devastating effect on the financial sustainability of many community organisations themselves. At the start of lockdown, 43 percent of charities predicted a rise in demand for services<sup>28</sup>. Yet the voluntary contributions that the sector runs on – be it traditional donations or through the operation of social enterprises like cafes – dropped dramatically during lockdown. In a September survey of voluntary and community sector organisations, over two-thirds of respondents reported loss of income, one-third of which reported losses of between 26 and 50 percent – even as new services were introduced to help combat the pandemic at the local level<sup>29</sup>. The loss of income to the groups whose services are essential to our social fabric risks a knock-on effect into wider society and the health service<sup>30</sup>. While the government has committed significant resources – £750m across the sector and a dedicated Coronavirus Community Support Fund of £200m – much more will need to be done to support neighbourhood-level, community-run public services as the effects of the pandemic continue and deepen.

## Current opportunity

We are moving towards a reformation of English local governance, to be laid out in early 2021 with publication of the Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper. This represents opportunities for double devolution. Recently, particularly in the context of COVID-19 recovery, actions and rhetoric from the government have suggested that their thinking is partially informed by a subsidiarity principle, with a series of moves towards hyperlocal legitimisation. On 28 July 2020, the prime minister announced a £2bn cycling and walking initiative<sup>31</sup>. With this came a commitment to consult on legislating for a communities’ right to close side streets as a means of creating “low traffic neighbourhoods”. The government also committed to piloting a new approach in areas with particularly poor health rates in which government will work in direct partnership with GPs to improve local cycling infrastructure, allowing access to bikes to be given and prescribed through a local surgery.

What this suggests is a willingness from government to bypass principal local authorities in favour of facilitating power at the hyperlocal, community level where it is functionally viable. In ‘Planning for the Future’ a policy paper published in August 2020 that sets out proposals for an overhaul of the country’s planning system, the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) announced an almost doubling of the funding used to help communities in deprived areas plan their local neighbourhoods<sup>32</sup>, facilitating community power whilst advancing hyperlocal functionality. This move could be seen to ‘cut out the middleman’ of local government and makes aspects of the 2011 Localism Act much more practically workable.

From these piecemeal shifts toward community power, from successive

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28 Institute of Fundraising (2020) – Coronavirus impact survey results: Charities cannot meet the surge in demand for services without urgent funding from the government

29 NICVA (2020) – Significant loss of income felt across the voluntary and community sector amid COVID-19 pandemic

30 BMJ (2020) – COVID-19: Charity cuts could put the NHS under even more pressure

31 Public Sector Executive (2020) – Prime Minister launches £2bn walking and cycling revolution

32 Development Finance Today (2020) – Funding almost doubled to help neighbourhood planning groups in urban and deprived areas

governments and the emergence of many models and organisational structures, a clearing is opening up for communities to build their own capacity to govern independently of traditional structures. The more this space expands, the stronger grows the evidence for how economically and functionally viable community control is when facilitated effectively. Expanding this space further, whilst refining and contextualising models of community control, power and organisation could maximise local participation and improve quality of life across the country. The current opportunity is for a hyperlocal form of participation that transcends tokenism and is facilitated, rather than undermined, by the local state. Whether or not this can be achieved depends not just on the breadth and depth of reform but also on the resources that accompany it.

### Pathways through participation

A 2011 report by NCVO, Involve and IVR<sup>33</sup> identified four key reasons why people begin to volunteer in community activity: motivation; a trigger incident; resources; opportunity. Resources and opportunity are the most relevant in terms of national and local state action. National policy must ensure that people have access to **practical resources** like time and money – for example the Kruger report recommends greater financial support from the state for volunteers. At the local level, a collaborative approach from councils can help build up **capability resources** – knowledge, skills, experience – in the community, as some of the case studies in section 3 illustrate.

But in the context of austerity, both local authorities and third-sector organisations can undermine potentially empowering concepts, initiatives or models for the sake of making them cheaper to implement or more easily manageable.

*“It is about sharing power and being able to take a leap of faith. I think authorities, institutions; they do have a natural tendency towards hoarding it, engaging in half-measures, and ultimately not being prepared to give it away or allow themselves not to be in control”*

**- Advisory panel member**

Community spirit rose greatly in the early months of lockdown, concurrent with the rise in community action<sup>34</sup>. At the same time, the national emergency required an entirely different fiscal approach from the government, one that already seemed prepared to abandon austerity to some degree. With the International Monetary Fund<sup>35</sup> urging against any austerity in response to the pandemic, and the British Medical Association among others linking austerity directly to the severity of the pandemic’s impact<sup>36,37</sup>, the political-economic case against austerity is being made by a broad and diverse coalition. There is an opportunity in this moment to embed community autonomy through legislation and provide resources to those communities in need. Steps in this direction have

33 Local Trust (2011) – Pathways through participation for Big Local areas

34 Locality (2020) – Leading the Coronavirus Recovery

35 Financial Times (2020) – IMF urges UK to keep spending to tackle pandemic crisis

36 British Medical Association (2020) – Austerity – COVID’s Little Helper

37 Smith (2020) – Confronting twin perils of pandemic and austerity – some lessons from 1920 & 2020

already been made, with the commissioning and delivering of the Levelling Up Our Communities report.

### Levelling Up Our Communities

In June 2020, the prime minister asked Danny Kruger, MP for Devizes and ex-advisor to Number 10, to review and put forward proposals for how charities, communities and the third sector might build on their successes so far and aid the COVID-19 recovery effort. The topics outlined placed emphasis on community action and self-help – expanding the role of civil society in assisting public services, developing infrastructure and tackling key issues the country now faces in the context of the pandemic. The language used is one of collaboration and facilitating community power and functionality. Maximising the role played by community groups, volunteers, charities and social enterprises in the COVID-19 recovery and the government’s levelling up agenda thereafter suggests that Prime Minister Johnson’s government is looking to expand the space within which hyperlocal organisations are able to operate.

Reporting in September 2020<sup>38</sup>, Kruger highlighted the community willingness to collaborate and showcased the community spirit brought on by the pandemic. The report recommended a suite of new measures to understand and track civil society’s contribution to the national economy, as well as a £2bn ‘Levelling Up Communities’ fund for “perpetual investment in long-term, transformational, community-led local projects in left-behind areas”. Kruger also recommended greater legal provisions for communities to take part in service provision and, in various forms, recognised the importance of social infrastructure in supporting community spirit. Perhaps most radically, the report also recommended a new Community Power Act, which would give charities and third sector groups a right to request a role in designing and delivering public services.

The Government reaction was somewhat muted, with a response from the prime minister that was non-committal in policy terms<sup>39</sup>. However, the pandemic and its effects are far from over. A one-month national lockdown in England was announced on 31 October and communities across the country are likely once again to be asked to step up in the name of national resilience over winter 2020-21. As we look to our local communities to provide crucial networks of support and service delivery, the need for a fairer settlement going forward is clear. In our national response and recovery, these concerns must be brought to the fore of policy, not left behind.

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38 Danny Kruger (2020) – Levelling Up Our Communities

39 Civil Society News (2020) – Charity reaction to Kruger report: ‘It is critical that government now acts’

## 3. History

This section takes a brief overview of some major governmental and non-governmental initiatives to build community power, focusing on the past two decades of policy, while also covering some prominent international approaches. The aim of this is to draw out the key overarching lessons of community power initiatives nationally and to draw points of inspiration from abroad, to help set out the principles required for putting empowerment into practice and present the context in which the case studies in section three emerge.

### 2000-2010: New deal(s) for communities

The early years of New Labour, which came to power in 1997 after eighteen years of Conservative government, were accompanied by a raft of legislation around devolution and decentralisation, ostensibly aimed at empowering communities. In 2000, the Local Government Act was passed, which established Local Strategic Partnerships. These were designed to bring together representatives from all sectors as a means of addressing local issues, the allocation of public funding and the discussion and delivery of various strategies, plans and initiatives. The New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme followed in 2001, which began with the aim of transforming 39 deprived English neighbourhoods through NDC partnerships. These implemented local regeneration schemes designed to support locally developed strategies rooted in a place-related, outcomes-based approach.

Evaluations of the scheme, however, found multiple barriers to genuine empowerment in the NDCs<sup>40</sup>, many associated with what one urban studies professor described as “*an inherent contradiction in the architecture of this programme: the more government was to ‘involve the local community’, the less easy central control would be*”<sup>41</sup>. This accusation, that the rhetoric of localism could not sway the desire to control and monitor all levels of policy, would continually dog community power initiatives under New Labour<sup>42</sup>. Its approach to communities and devolution in general was described as a ‘modern Janus’ – the Ancient Roman god of transition – even as the devolution legislation was passed, often ostensibly to the hyperlocal level, a fixation on measuring and directing ‘outcomes’ meant that initiatives were often far more prescriptive than the language of ceding power to communities suggested<sup>43</sup>.

In 2006, the government published a Local Government White Paper that

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40 Dinham (2005) – Empowered or over-powered? The real experiences of local participation in the UK’s New Deal for Communities

41 Lawless (2006) – Area-based urban interventions: Rationale and outcomes: The New Deal for Communities Programme in England

42 Lodge & Muir (2011) – Localism under New Labour

43 Moran (2006) – The Polycentric State: New Spaces of Empowerment and Engagement?

encouraged councils to develop 'neighbourhood charters' and provided a stronger legal framework to require local authorities to secure the participation of local communities in the operation of services, among a number of other recommendations and changes. Unfortunately, publication came ahead of several major government reviews with the potential to remove or reshuffle the very powers of local service delivery proposed in the white paper<sup>44</sup>. In 2007, the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act led to the introduction of Local Involvement Networks. These were to be networks of local people and groups, designed to ensure that local communities were involved in the monitoring of service provision, had influence over key decisions and enjoyed a stronger voice overall in the commissioning of health and social care. Furthermore, the act enabled the creation of new parish councils, potentially restoring a local tier of permanent representative democracy with tax-raising powers and the ability to determine expenditure – although progress on creating these parish councils has been slow.

In this period, there was also increased acknowledgement of the importance of involving residents in local development, particularly regarding council decisions made on community hubs and other social infrastructure. In 2004, The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act established the requirement for Statements of Community Involvement to be produced by local authorities, explaining to the public how they were to be involved in the preparation of local development documents. In 2008, just as the global financial crisis hijacked the policy agenda, a Community Empowerment White Paper was published. Although the term was not included in the paper, the idea of double devolution was influential in its gestation<sup>45</sup>. A key premise of the paper was that local authorities should promote democratic understanding and participation in their areas. The paper also proposed a number of funding streams and units to support community empowerment and ownership, such as the £70m Community-Builders Fund and the £7.5m Empowerment Fund. The white paper failed, however, to address issues of structure, complexity and accessibility of the public sector to civil society<sup>46</sup>, themselves complicated by the overlapping initiatives of the preceding decade. The need to simplify and a desire to cut through to civil society partially underpinned the advent in the 2010s of the 'Big Society'.

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44 Ibid

45 Ibid

46 Nick Bailey (2010) – Understanding Community Empowerment in Urban Regeneration and Planning in England: Putting Policy and Practice in Context

## Community Power and Development

Community power in the UK has often been connected to development and planning decisions, with local residents coming together to challenge decision-making they felt excluded from.

- In the 1960s, in response to strong criticisms of undemocratic, unilateral planning decisions, the government organised the Skeffington Committee to restructure planning processes to accommodate public consultation and engagement.
- Consequently, the 1969 Planning Act sought to increase the consultation requirements of local planning agencies.
- The 1970s saw a shift in the discussion on public participation in decision-making. Increasingly, it focused on neighbourhoods and there was a drive to develop community-based local solutions to the issues affecting places across the UK.
- In 1973, Planning Aid services began, partially funded by the government.
- In 1995, the Single Regeneration Budget was introduced to pull together different government programmes and funding streams as a means of simplifying the funding process and providing better support for local regeneration projects. The initiative ran for six years.

## 2010-present: Big Society and Community Rights

In the wake of the 2008 financial crash and the election of a Conservative-led coalition government, the 2010s saw the rise of David Cameron's Big Society agenda. This was promoted as a genuine drive towards devolving power to localities and their communities. In 2011, the Localism Act afforded communities three new "community rights": the Community Right to Build, the Community Right to Bid, and the Community Right to Challenge – all of which are, to varying extents, important legislative tools in the broader goal of creating powerful communities. In 2012, the government introduced a National Planning Policy Framework that stated that "early and meaningful engagement and collaboration with neighbourhoods, local organisations and businesses<sup>47</sup>" was now essential.

Between 2010 and 2015, and later revisited with a 2018 Green Paper, the government embarked on a policy of community integration, coalescing around the idea of strong mutual commitments and responsibilities whilst emphasising the shared aspirations, values and experiences of local residents – rather than the differences political discourse at large typically draws attention to. Despite these shifts, progress on the intended outcomes of the frameworks and policies delivered in communities has been slow and the processes and structures they involve are often difficult to access. This has been attributed to the extreme complexity of private-public-third sector relations in modern Britain<sup>48</sup> and to a lack of coherence across the policy agenda, despite its commitment in theory to

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47 MHCLG (2012) - National Planning Policy Framework

48 Fenwick & Gibbon (2017) – The rise and fall of the Big Society in the UK

greater community empowerment<sup>49</sup>. The debate around the Big Society agenda remains polarised. Supporters argue that it was a genuine effort to enlarge civil society and increase the autonomy of local communities, as laid out by Jesse Norman in his 2010 book on the subject<sup>50</sup>. Critics, on the other hand, say that it was a cynical attempt to mask a retrenchment of the state's role in service delivery<sup>51</sup>.

Looking beyond policy motivation, a concrete result of the Big Society agenda has been the proliferation of community ownership of local assets through the Community Rights empowered by the Localism Act. Community ownership sits on the top rung of the ladder of participation. Community ownership of assets means that they are owned and controlled by a community-based organisation with a representative mechanism that allows members of a community to take part in and influence how the organisation operates, with the benefits of the asset passed on to the community directly. These organisations are independent of government and, to varying extents, market forces. The level of control and accountability involved in community ownership empowers communities to participate in the development and governance of their local areas. Whether in finance, development, food, housing, public services or energy production, examples of and potential for community ownership are abundantly clear<sup>52,53</sup>. Community ownership tends to lean towards dispersed and common ownership of assets, processes of deliberative democracy, and a vision of community benefit and social justice<sup>54</sup>.

Most community ownership initiatives are motivated by two key aims: to preserve (or improve) an asset deemed to be of local value and to provide the benefits of that asset to the community. Transferring the assets of social infrastructure into community hands is critical to creating the conditions for community empowerment, provided it is accompanied with sufficient understanding of investment needs. When a community group comes together to co-own an asset, and it is done in a careful way, it takes the pressure off local authorities to deliver local services in locally responsive ways<sup>55,56</sup>. At the same time, it builds a sense of connection between communities and their social infrastructure, one that begins to strengthen the foundations for them to be more autonomous and participatory in the long run. One challenge, however, is how to prevent these social infrastructure assets from falling into private hands<sup>57</sup>. Another is to ensure community asset transfer really does empower communities and is not either the product of desperation from communities who would otherwise lose the asset or the off-loading by local authorities of expensive liabilities, complete with overly strict conditions.

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49 Lowndes & Pratchett (2011) – Local Governance under the Coalition Government: Austerity, Localism and the 'Big Society'

50 Norman (2010) – The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics

51 Coote (2011) – Big Society and the New Austerity

52 Power to Change (2019) – Our assets, our future: the economics, outcomes and sustainability of assets in community ownership

53 Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2008) – Community ownership and management of assets

54 ResPublica (2013) – Making It Mutual: The ownership revolution that Britain needs

55 Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2011) – Community organisations controlling assets: a better understanding

56 House of Commons: Communities and Local Government Committee (2012) – Mutual and co-operative approaches to delivering local services

57 Locality (2018) – The Great British Sell Off: How we're losing our vital publicly owned buildings and spaces

*“Often the conversation around community rights can be outright dismissive – instead I believe it is more useful to recognise them as a useful tool that needs a lot of work. I think they’re important levers, it’s just that the mechanism by which people access them are a massive problem”*

**- Advisory panel member**

While it has been acknowledged that successful asset transfers have empowered volunteer groups, the success of the policy overall has been limited due to severe capacity constraints in the context in which it tends to be implemented. The relationships between local authorities and volunteer groups required to complete an asset transfer successfully have been limited by austerity constraints on local government, and the money and time required to complete the process is a significant barrier to volunteer groups<sup>58</sup>, particularly in deprived areas of the country. The kind of early stage, pre-feasibility funding needed to complete an asset transfer successfully is difficult to come by through the existing grant system, especially in the six-month window given by Community Rights<sup>59</sup>.

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58 Findlay-King et al (2017) – Localism and the Big Society: the asset transfer of leisure centres and libraries – fighting closures or empowering communities?

59 Locality (2018) – Places & Spaces

## 4. New models from abroad

This section discusses some models of community participation which have emerged abroad and summarises evaluations of their success in creating powerful communities. Each model is described, discussed and situated on the ladder of participation.

### New municipalism in Europe

Even before the 2008 financial crisis and drive to austerity, increased globalisation was linked to an observable trend towards devolution throughout the late twentieth century<sup>60</sup>. Since the financial crisis, particularly in Europe, political devolution increased as governments have found themselves forced to experiment, in the face of democratic pressures and austere budget cuts, with new approaches to the role which the state, both national and local, should play in relation to the communities they serve. In the UK, the combination of increasing austerity and a powerfully centralised state has been at the root of many local government cuts, but in more decentralised countries, the changing circumstances have led local governments to develop their own strategies and approaches<sup>61</sup>.

One such approach is 'new municipalism' – born out of municipalism, an intentionally diffuse agenda that is nonetheless rooted in local context and a genuine belief in the capacity of cities, towns and parishes to govern themselves. In its approach to governance, municipalism is characterised by a focus on common goals and increasing participation to identify and target the specific needs and wants of local residents. There are profound practical implications for constructing an independent political entity, powered by local members, that is able to demonstrate and develop its capacity for self-governance. This approach can play an important role in building the power base of communities, enabling them to become more functionally effective.

The approach has its limitations, however. In Madrid, attempts by new municipalists to cede power to communities upon gaining local institutional control have been beset by legal and political barriers. As well as the problems of negotiating with an austerity-minded central government whilst also keeping the community involved, the Ahora Madrid 'movement party' faced major challenges in translating its broad coalition of community concerns into a coherent policy platform. On the other hand, when in power the party was able to increase city revenue significantly, and their ascent led to a genuine increase in community power in the city, with co-management extended to public spaces and some services, and €100m allocated for community-led neighbourhood

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60 Rodríguez-Pose & Gill (2003) – The Global Trend towards Devolution and its Implications

61 Kim & Warner (2020) – Pragmatic municipalism or austerity urbanism? Understanding local government responses to fiscal stress

investment<sup>62</sup>. A complex picture, the Madrid experience shows the potential and limitations of new municipalism in attempting to merge the concerns of communities with the complexities of governance, with a genuinely transformative approach to local governance possible, but by no means guaranteed.

### Participatory budgeting in Latin America

Participatory budgeting (PB) is an effective way to involve communities in decision-making and facilitate their power. It is a technique used by local government with its roots in Latin America, where communities in Porto Alegre, Brazil have been involved in allocating how the city's regeneration budget is spent since 1989. The method has been trialled in the Netherlands and several other EU countries in recent years. When widely accessible and inclusive in design, participatory budgeting shows the potential of local government facilitating greater community involvement for the benefit of all – inspiring increased and effective participation in the governance of the local area<sup>63</sup>. Participatory budgeting sits on the sixth or Partnership rung of the Ladder of Participation, whereby communities are involved in negotiations with the ability to influence the status quo but have not reached the seventh rung of delegated power.

In an article discussing the role that participatory budgeting can play in the governance of the UK, Heather Blakey lays out four principles for its success<sup>64</sup>:

- direct participation of individuals in setting budget priorities;
- deliberation (i.e. informed decision-making rather than simple opinion polling);
- a social contract (through participation, citizens become co-responsible for the implementation of the project);
- and accountability (shared and transparent management of resources).

After taking off in Latin America throughout the 1990s, participatory budgeting is now used in more than 100 European cities, some of them major conurbations with large populations, including Seville in Spain and certain districts of Berlin, Lisbon, Paris and Rome. Porto Alegre, Brazil, claimed by many to be the birthplace of modern participatory budgeting practice, has seen great success – participatory budgeting involved 17,200 citizens at its peak and has distributed \$160m worth of public money towards issues and development deemed to be a local priority. The process improved local people's lives through resident-led distribution of funding and resources for the benefit of the most deprived areas of Porto Alegre. It also brought those usually excluded from the political process into the heart of decision making; women, ethnic minorities, low income and low education participants were overrepresented in comparison with the city's population as a whole.

### Multiform networking in the USA

'Multiform networks' describes how a community ought to be imagined and structured. The model stems from a charter reform that was adopted by the

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<sup>62</sup> Janoschka & Mota (2020) – New municipalism in action or urban neoliberalisation reloaded? An analysis of governance change, stability and path dependence in Madrid (2015-19)

<sup>63</sup> PB Network (2015) – Participatory Budgeting: An Introduction

<sup>64</sup> Heather Blakey (2008) – Participatory budgeting in the UK: a challenge to the system?

City of Los Angeles in 1999 that included the creation of a neighbourhood governance system – the implementation of a new Department of Neighbourhood Empowerment that was tasked with the specific objective of promoting citizen participation in government and making government more receptive and responsive to local needs<sup>65</sup>. As the name suggests, this model can take various forms. What grounds it is a commitment to the idea of building social capital and increasing participation as much as possible. These participatory networks play a mediating role and attempt to connect community groups to processes of policy formation, budgeting and service delivery. General forms of social capital set out to promote norms of reciprocity and develop the civic and organisational capacity of localities. They also lead to increased participation in local democracy and context specific advice for the public sector.

As a result, attitudes of political efficacy are promoted; crucial to increased group-level commitment, improved public discourse, inclusive representation and finding solutions to local issues that are born out of genuine deliberation and participation by a range of community stakeholders. An incorporation of more fungible forms of social capital has proved to increase productivity by residents in specific activities. More extensive, 'bonded' ties between local government officials and community groups have increased the likelihood that residents will be recruited into the network as a result of the development of a community consciousness and other social pressures. While it goes a step further than much of the UK landscape of participation, multiform networking is a form of high-level tokenism. The citizens are hearing and being heard, providing input for those in power; however, unless citizens can advise – the Placation or fifth rung of the ladder – participation does not necessarily lead to change.

## Key lessons

### Key lessons from abroad

In practice, new municipalism has produced some immensely thought-provoking strategies and results. The municipality of Badalona, north east of Barcelona, had 7,000 citizens participate in a process to shape the city's budget through a series of assemblies, consultations and online voting<sup>66</sup>. As in Madrid, this participation covered multiple levels of the ladder, from tokenism and informing at the lowest level to partnership in citizen power at the highest level. Exactly where citizen participation falls on the ladder within these levels depends on the ability of citizens to affect the status quo, which in turn is impacted by internal and external institutional realities. In this regard, new municipalism shows up the importance of a facilitative state, at the national as well as the local level.

The lessons learned from Porto Alegre are profound and demonstrate why the city has become something of a participatory budgeting icon. Firstly, each participatory budgeting process would begin with a presentation by the respective government on what they spent the budget on over the course of the previous year – creating a clear path of accountability, legitimising the process and assuring residents that their participation could lead to positive impacts locally. Secondly, the initiative's tiered assembly model allowed for participation to work on a local, regional and city-wide level, interconnecting them with one

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65 Musso & Weare (2016) - Social capital and community representation: How multiform networks promote local democracy in Los Angeles

66 Jonny Ball (2019) – What is "new municipalism", and can it really combat austerity?

another – building social capital and a sense of civic duty. Lastly, the creation of a government body solely dedicated to participatory budgeting allowed for increased deliberation, organisational efficiency and full commitment on the part of those working to deliver local priorities.

Porto Alegre demonstrates that, provided there is a strong political commitment from the outset, appropriate financial resources and participatory arrangements are well-structured, inclusive and transparent, participatory budgeting has the potential to empower communities to take part in the ‘levelling up’ of their own local areas by giving them power in directing local investment. In Porto Alegre, the deliberative and inclusive nature of the budgeting process has been linked to favourable environmental and social outcomes such as greatly increasing access to clean water and expanding and upgrading the city’s waste management system<sup>67</sup>. This participatory budgeting example sits firmly on the sixth or Partnership rung of the ladder of participation, empowering communities to influence the status quo.

However, both these examples also rely on a vision of ‘extending’ local government out to the community, embedding the community within the local state bureaucracy. It is not clear that either – founded in models of governance very different to our own – provide models that resonate or reflect the history or culture of the UK. Rather than attempt to import models wholesale, it is important to look at the lessons which have been learned which could be instructive for UK policy. The favourable outcomes achieved through participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre show that deliberative, co-design focused policymaking can lead to desirable and equitable local outcomes. Likewise, the efforts of new municipalists to open up local processes to communities and the multiform approach to building broad local coalitions of action all help to increase participation and civic awareness.

Looking ahead for community power in the UK, these elements might be looked at as crucial to capacity building. Expanding the role of the citizen can help bring a broader understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the council, at the same time bringing together residents at the neighbourhood level as part of the process. Particularly in areas with little social infrastructure in terms of community organisations and networks, this kind of process can help build capacity across multiple domains – building social capital and trust within the community whilst also creating more effective channels of communication with local government.

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<sup>67</sup> Friant (2019) – Deliberating for sustainability: lessons from the Porto Alegre experiment with participatory budgeting

## Participatory budgeting in the UK

In August 2011, the Department for Communities and Local Government released a study of PB in England<sup>68</sup>; including areas such as Newcastle, Southampton and Stockport. All study areas made their participatory budgeting mechanism open to all within specific a geographical criteria and with small-medium scale pots of funding (typically between £25,000 and £150,000). The London Borough of Tower Hamlets was a notable exception, providing resources of £2.4m per annum. Tower Hamlets operated an authority-wide approach. PB at Thornhill was not led by a local authority, but targeted a specific area of budgeting (healthcare). Stockport focused on a particular theme, community safety, born out of partnerships between police, the local authority and the communities themselves. The study found that participatory budgeting has the potential to bring a great number of benefits. One such benefit was that individuals and organisations involved in PB reported an increased confidence in their ability to tackle local issues and negotiate with local government and other public bodies. In a survey for the government study, 90 percent of respondents said that community empowerment and building residents' confidence to engage in local decision-making was the main purpose behind their PB projects – an outcome that was widely delivered. Critical success factors included that PB processes were embedded within small and easily recognisable geographies, and had effective monitoring and evaluation practices that were fed back to residents and stakeholders. This helped residents understand and witness themselves the tangible benefits of the process they had been involved in, therefore building confidence and maintaining engagement and enthusiasm. A transparent decision-making process also helped to build their confidence as well as trust in the processes and institutions involved.

## Key lessons from the UK

*"I believe in the principle of devolution and community involvement across the board no matter who you are talking about, but the reality is that wealthier areas are able to do that successfully because they have the money, spare time, strong connections and are already being resourced very well. Left behind areas lack all of these things, making them more likely to be unsuccessful – it is those areas that need the most consideration in the broader devolution agenda"*

**– Advisory panel member**

Capacity constraints at the community level is a recurrent issue in the recent history of community policy in the UK. Evaluation has repeatedly found the processes of involvement in government schemes too demanding, whether in terms of time or resources. The complexity and bureaucracy of top-down schemes intended to empower communities, from New Labour to the Big Society, have often involved demands on financial and social capital which have precluded

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<sup>68</sup> Department for Communities and Local Government (2011) – Communities in the driving seat: a study of Participatory Budgeting in England

genuine community empowerment. Moving forward, policy to empower communities should address access to long-term revenue funding, which helps fund activities and raise capacity, as a priority and reduce the bureaucratic burden on community organisations. Another key lesson from UK governmental and non-governmental initiatives is that direct devolution of responsibilities to communities is more successful than trying to open up existing governance structures and delivery mechanisms to community involvement. The success of Community Associations, also observed in the UK's trial of participatory budgeting, has been achieved through devolving decision-making power directly to communities. By contrast, the Right to Serve of the Coalition years and New Labour policy from the NDCs to the Communities In Control White Paper have all been criticised as too awkwardly placed within labyrinthine structures of governance and delivery.

## 5. Where we are now

A recent report from NCVO and 360Giving provides evidence of a rich and thriving sector of informal grassroots organisations operating below the usual regulatory and administrative radars<sup>69</sup>. Analysing 360Giving’s dataset of grants given between 2016 and 2019, *Under the Radar* found nearly 13,000 non-profit organisations operating at the local community or neighbourhood level not identifiable through other sources. And this is likely to be the tip of the informal community sector iceberg as the data represents only those groups who have sought and received grants over the last three years.

As the case studies that follow in this section show, community sector activity of this scope and scale will flourish even in deprived communities if there is genuine access to the resources, networks and support that enable people to participate in and develop the solutions and services their communities need. The breadth of community activities which emerge where this support exists is evidenced, for example, in the experience of Big Local neighbourhoods across England over the last few years.

Established by the National Lottery Community Fund in 2012, the Big Local programme has given 150 ‘left behind’ areas £1m each to spend as the community decides over a 15-year period. Big Local neighbourhoods have used the programme’s investment to set up a wealth of initiatives reflecting and responding to the context locally. They range from employment skills training and educational support programmes, often focussed on raising the aspirations of young people, to arts and crafts clubs, sports events, festivals and performances, projects addressing loneliness, and community enterprises like healthy-eating cafes and sustainable food-growing initiatives. Often activities begin informally and at a micro-scale, with loose groupings of people coming together with a shared interest or concern. Over time, some groups have chosen to incorporate as a charity or limited company, but many are likely to continue below the radar, contributing to the ecosystem of community life.

### Pop-up parishes or Community Improvement Districts

As part of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, the Government produced a framework for residents to put forward proposals on the creation of a parish council for their local area. The legislation was promoted as a means for easily identifiable, geographically-based neighbourhoods to take control of hyperlocal powers and delivery of services via these new parish councils. However, due to a range of barriers including a lack of knowledge of cumbersome legislative mechanisms and an understandable aversion to extra layers

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<sup>69</sup> 360Giving and NCVO (2020) – *Below the radar: Exploring grants data for grassroots organisations*

of bureaucracy, the establishment of parish councils has had mixed results – particularly struggling in London and other more urbanised areas. On the other hand, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), another legislative framework provided by government in 2007, have seen much more success in implementation – particularly in the capital. These areas are the product of proposals put forward by local promoters, they have fixed time limits and are fully controlled by BID members. They have managerial and financial capacity whilst, in the context of London, frequently co-operating and collaborating with boroughs and the GLA. Where instigated, BIDs have had success in improving the look of streets and tackling crime as well as with marketing and public relations campaigns.

This has led many to suggest a legislative framework for a community version of the BID model; community improvement districts (CIDs) or “pop-up parishes”<sup>70</sup>. These would be temporary, hyperlocal institutions that are established to tackle specific local issues and develop the area of control. A 2011 report published by the City of London and London Councils<sup>71</sup> outlined how these pop-up parishes could operate:

- A simple yet formal process that allows a community group to determine a CID area;
- Rules regarding the drawing of boundaries in accordance with local communities;
- Rules concerning the role and responsibilities of a CID;
- Referendums to decide whether local residents want a CID;
- A fixed time-limit, with the potential of renewal subject to further referendums;
- A facilitatory role for the borough or local council in shaping and approving CID plans.

The concept was endorsed in the 2020 Kruger report on Levelling Up Communities, with funding suggested through a ‘top-slice’ from the Stronger Towns Fund and Shared Prosperity Fund – with the money to be given without conditions attached, potentially avoiding some of the bureaucracy of previous policy. The pop-up parish concept displays high levels of community participation, equivalent to the highest rungs of the citizen power level on Arnstein’s ladder whereby a community group holds the majority of decision-making power. It certainly reaches the rung of ‘delegated power’ and, depending on the scope of the facilitatory borough or local council role, could enable full citizen control.

## Case studies

The case studies in the appendix to this report look at recent initiatives in the UK aimed at overcoming some of the policy failures described in the previous section and instances from abroad where some of the emerging models have been applied. The studies show how attempts to forge more genuine local control have been made successfully within the confines of the English local government system and provide further inspiration from other countries. They indicate where there may be opportunities to open up local government reform to double devolution, how this might be done and what pitfalls are to be avoided. This section identifies some key principles from across the case studies and discusses them in light of the Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper and Planning White Papers.

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70 Ben Rogers (2019) – Parish pump politics can help London communities

71 City of London & London Councils (2011) – Engaging London’s Communities: the Big Society and Localism

Brief overviews and key points are provided below:

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## UK case studies



### Wigan Council

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#### Overview

For the past nine years, and more significantly over the past six, Wigan Council has embedded community empowerment into their strategy and practice, taking on a 'community partnership' approach. Their 'Deal for Communities' is informed by the underlying purpose of providing for communities, as well as a commitment to listen to Wigan's communities and deliver tangible results.

In 2018, they spoke to more than 6,000 residents in 83 locations across Wigan as part of their 'Big Listening Project'. The ideas from this initiative went on to inform the vision and priorities of the council's 'New Deal 2030'. A few years prior, the council's 'Listening to Action' initiative undertook weeks of listening sessions on a ward-by-ward basis, presented to residents as an open invitation for dialogue.

#### Key points

- An **accessible community asset transfer strategy** seeks to overcome some of the problems with asset transfer through a network of 'community infrastructure groups' sharing experience and providing support at all stages of the process.
- Mixing the **integration of council teams** working alongside communities on the ground with investment to support community organisations to act independently.
- The approach has focused on **cultural change within the council** achieved partly through a broad outreach programme designed to strengthen ties between the council and communities.
- Whilst consulting extensively, there is a recognition that **participation must always be results-oriented** and lead to tangible outcomes for the community.
- *Participation ladder*: Straddles placation, up to the level of delegated citizen power. Participation ranges from the ability to advise without the right to decide, up to holding the majority of decision-making power. Independence for community organisations would enable full citizen control.

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## Big Local

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### Overview

In 2012, the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) established Local Trust with a £217m endowment to deliver the Big Local programme over a 15-year period.

NLCF had identified 150 areas that had historically 'missed out' on lottery and other funding – typically these were areas which had low levels of civic capital, missing out on funding in part because there were no organisations locally applying for support. Each of the areas were allocated £1m of Big Local funding. This could be spent in any way they chose, provided local residents organised themselves locally to plan and manage that funding, involving the wider community in the decision-making process.

Beyond that, rules, constraints and priorities that define Big Local have been for local people to decide. By design, the programme is bottom-up and community led; there are no top-down targets or centrally-imposed delivery models.

### Key points

- Big Local provides **patient finance**: a 15-year-period allows communities time to build confidence and skills, make decisions and deliver change.
- Accessibility is key: **bureaucracy is minimized**, with none of the usual pressures to meet end-of-year spend targets or other arbitrary deadlines.
- It is bottom-up, founded on trust: **resident-led partnerships** identify and address their own needs, supported through skills, training and mentoring programmes.
- Evidence emerging suggests the approach supports **development of new solutions and a new social and civic economy**, including through new or improved community spaces, anchor organisations, partnerships and networks locally and beyond.
- Local Trust policy, research and influencing programmes connect the experience, insights and evidence coming from Big Local Communities to the national debate with the aim of **creating the conditions for change** more broadly.
- *Participation ladder*: The Big Local programme is situated on the highest rungs of Delegated power and Citizen control, giving communities full managerial and decision-making power.

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## Frome Town Council

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### Overview

Frome Town Council has rethought the role of a town council and has inspired other town councils through its example, gaining national and international renown in the process. From its town strategy for 2020 to 2024, Frome Town Council sets out a vision for itself as a place that is 'proudly independent and puts local solutions first' while remaining 'outward looking, building and maintaining connections both nationally and internationally'.

From these foundations the desire is to build:

- A positive and inclusive town where no-one gets left behind
- A clean, healthy and happy town
- A thriving and resilient community and local economy
- A town that actively encourages local people to participate in and feel ownership over ideas, spaces and assets
- A town which embraces innovation, takes risks, celebrates its successes and learns from its experiences

The town council is funded by a precept on council tax for Frome residents paid to Mendip District Council.

### Key points

- **Community connectors** are community members who work to inform others on how to access support groups, services and information that might help improve their health and wellbeing
  - The town council **provides funding, training and advice for community organisations.** Bespoke advice and support ranges from business planning, trustee support, budgeting and working in partnership.
  - **Resilience is emphasised,** with the town council taking action in relation to, amongst other contingencies, political uncertainty and severe reductions in public sector funding
  - In anticipation of plans to create either one or two unitary authorities in Somerset, **Frome has vowed to engage with the devolution debate** to explore what services should be delivered best at what level of the council
  - The council reserves **35,000£ for participatory budgeting**, creating a 'People's Budget' for local priorities.
  - *Participation ladder:* The town council demonstrates what could be described as placation, the fifth rung on Arnstein's ladder whereby citizens can advise without the right to decide. However, the multiple resources provided in different forms to increase community capacity allow for a much higher degree of participation in civil society.
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## International case studies



### City of Toronto

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#### Overview

The Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy 2020 is the city's plan for empowerment in each of their 140 neighbourhoods. Through partnerships with community groups, community businesses and other residents, the strategy lays out investments in services, facilities and projects in 31 identified Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (NIAs). Since the beginning of the strategy in 2014, over 24,000 residents, 1,700 stakeholders and 21 City Divisions and Agencies have been involved in the planning and delivery of local services.

Across the 31 NIAs, there are 15 'neighbourhood planning tables', essentially boards that are made up of local residents, businesses and councillors, community agencies, and public sector workers. These tables meet frequently to identify the needs and priorities of the community, and put forward actions to support neighbourhood well-being in accordance with the aforementioned framework. Each table is supported by a Community Development Officer (CDO) who has the role of connecting local residents with key decision makers in the community, so that goals and priorities are rooted in local context.

#### Key points

- For communities in the NIAs, there is a well-defined and singular local authority point of contact.
- The city employs a **broad concept of local wellbeing**, with different 'domains' such as 'economic opportunities' and 'healthy lives' as part of interlinked and holistic strategy.
- The city takes a **pluralistic approach** with the local community as key stakeholders, with 15 planning boards made up of residents, businesses, councillors and community agencies across the 31 NIAs.
- *Participation ladder*: This strategy falls firmly within the level of citizen power on the ladder of participation, where at the very least partnership allows for negotiation and engagement with councillors.

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## Chile's Neighbourhood Recovery Programme

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### Overview

Designed after transformative governance processes in Spain and Brazil, the Neighbourhood Recovery Programme is the first targeted urban regeneration programme to be implemented in Chile's underprivileged urban areas. The programme focusses on 200 neighbourhoods across the country that demonstrated high levels of physical deterioration and social vulnerability, with specific objectives to re-appropriate public spaces, improve environmental conditions and socially integrate and empower neighbourhoods. Neighbourhood improvement projects were designed to target the specific needs of each community by taking a multi-sectoral approach. The Programme was expected to benefit over 450,000 people over a four-year period.

From an initial focus on physically upgrading the neighbourhoods, the Neighbourhood Recovery Programme has evolved to confront the profound social issues of in the once vulnerable poblaciones. The policy now actively promotes equality and people's right to their city in accessing public spaces, public goods and other infrastructure.

### Key points

- The programme is designed to accommodate differences in the challenges, opportunities and disposition of different communities, this **variation across neighbourhoods** creates flexibility.
- There is extensive **collaboration with the community** in identifying objectives for regeneration.
- **Constant, reliable and transparent communication** has been established over the course of the programme, the cornerstone of successful regeneration.
- The programme encourages **knowledge propagation** through best practice sharing by different community and government groups across neighbourhoods.
- *Participation ladder*: Opening up priorities for regeneration to community deliberation situates the programme across the two rungs of citizen power, and partnership and delegated power, presenting increasing degrees of decision-making influence.

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## Participatory Budgeting in Seville

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### Overview

Taking inspiration from the model set by Porto Alegre in Brazil, the city council of Seville introduced participatory budgeting in 2004. The city has a populace of 713,000 and its areas are divided into three levels: neighbourhoods, districts and the city in general. Each level has its own unique deliberative 'assembly'. The neighbourhood assembly is intentionally left open to all residents, who can make budgeting proposals and elect delegates to represent them at the district and city-level assemblies.

Participatory budgeting campaigns in Seville are publicly advertised in local newspapers and TV channels to maximise awareness and engagement. Neighbourhood assemblies provide participants with a wealth of information on where funding can be directed as well as what the previous budget consisted of.

### Key points

- Dedication to providing **information and education**.
- Priorities are selected in accordance with **mutually-agreed criteria**.
- Direct connection with city authorities.
- *Participation ladder*: The massive expansion of assemblies to give representative democracy at neighbourhood level is a form of community power by *delegation*.

From the studies, some key principles can be drawn:

- A relational approach to governance.
- Strong networking and communication systems.
- Dedication to building capacity.
- Work rooted in listening to communities
- A willingness to cede some power and control
- A culture that is engaged and facilitative

*“On the few occasions that empowerment initiatives have produced good outcomes, what’s happened is that the administrative mindset has been replaced by a relational mindset. One that is not about functions but about interests; not about being in control but about giving control away to somebody else, and so on. The switch that has been achieved is from administrative to relational”*

**– Advisory panel member**

Empowering communities requires government, both central and local, to adopt a broad change in mindset – from administrative to relational. Through this cultural change, the principle of subsidiarity can be embedded in policy and practice, ensuring that all councillors and officers across the silos of local government understand the role communities should play in local decision-making and what they can do to enable and facilitate their empowerment. This may appear to be an impractical suggestion in the UK, given the specific contexts of local government and the neighbourhoods they serve, but as the approach of Wigan Council has demonstrated, having this mindset embedded in the approach, training and strategy of local authorities can lead to more holistic practices on the ground. A relational approach also means understanding that communities are not homogenous. Among different neighbourhoods in a local authority, there will be specific opportunities and priorities, differing attitudes and often vastly different material circumstances. Understanding this, and building unique and mutually respectful relationships across different places, was essential to the programme of regeneration in Chile.

An example of putting a relational mindset into practice would be for local authorities to strive towards making their decision-making processes more participatory for communities. An effective start in this regard would be to make all funding of some non-core services subject to participatory budgeting – to begin to give communities a sense of autonomy over local budgeting decisions. The success of both of these forms of participation can be linked to their direct relationship to tangible results. This principle goes far beyond participatory budgeting however, and should apply to all attempts to co-design or even merely consult with local communities.

Part of the success of the cultural change driving Wigan’s ‘New Deal’ has been a sustained commitment to linking consultations with tangible outcomes. This again reflects a relational mindset, seeing community engagement as an ongoing partnership and not a hurdle to be overcome. This needs a long journey of cultural change, one which is traversed through the sharing of perspectives, as enabled through Wigan’s extensive Big Listening Project which helped drive cultural change in the council.

Strong systems for social networking and connecting with the local authority are present across our case studies. Creating and sustaining powerful communities is

an easier task when community organisation is well connected both to the local authority and to the wider ecosystem of local action. In Chile, the government encouraged 'knowledge propagation' by facilitating best practice sharing from neighbourhood planning groups and other stakeholders. In Toronto, residents benefited from one single point of contact at the local authority, which cut through bureaucracy and administrative procedure. Creating these strong networks requires organisational change from local authorities; the simplification of bureaucracy and a long-term mindset which prevents constant policy reinvention.

*"Community empowerment is great for those who have the power and capacity to use that power, but it is not enough for communities where they don't have that, it can result in disadvantages and the exacerbation of existing issues. It is demotivating for the community; it is another example of the community's failings if they haven't been able to be successful due to a lack of capacity"*

**- Advisory panel member**

Finally, resourcing is of course crucial, both in terms of financial resources and broader elements of capacity. The revenue support for social infrastructure of neighbourhoods; parks, libraries, pubs, hubs and the like is a key priority across our studies. Social infrastructure must be suitably resourced and placed into the hands of communities wherever possible and functionally viable. In Frome, grants are given out from a small grants fund of up to £300 and a larger community grand fund of up to £2000. This is also accompanied with an advice service for local organisations of all kinds to help with things like access to wider capital funding and business administration. This helps build up social as well as financial capital. In Wigan, a similar approach is taken on a larger scale with their accessible community asset transfer policy, where communities are funded and supported throughout the process of asset transfer, allowing greater take-up of the policy in more deprived areas.

### **Towards a facilitative local state**

Perhaps the most striking elements of our case studies are those where the local state is entirely facilitative, providing resource and advice for communities to act autonomously. This is prominent in Frome, with the provision of funding, training and advice for community organisations. The end result of the asset transfer programme in Wigan too, is neighbourhood-level autonomy. This points to a possibility for innovation in the English local government system, to move beyond community power as an extension of power already held in councils into the community, towards locally-specific arrangements where different community groups and organisations take on different roles within the wider social ecosystem. This can be achieved if capacity is built, social infrastructure resourced and, in the first instance, the networks of communication between council and community are strengthened. These are the conditions that must be in place for a meaningful transfer of power in any aspect of community life and local governance. In the upcoming reforms to the system in England, there is an opportunity to embed these conditions.

### **The Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper**

A white paper on English devolution was first announced in September 2019. Momentum behind the paper greatly increased after the Conservative majority in the December 2019 election, especially given the prominent place the

Levelling Up agenda occupied in the new government's stated ambitions. After the upheaval of the pandemic, the white paper was reoriented with a dual focus on levelling up and on rebuilding and was renamed the Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper. Reports on how radical the paper's proposals will be have oscillated wildly in the months since the announcement of lockdown, and the date of its release keeps being pushed back, most recently into early 2021. Early talk of widescale unitarisation of local authorities set off major campaigns of influencing from councils of all forms and caused a great deal of in-fighting and consternation within local government. Since this peak in activity, expectations have been dialled down. Nevertheless, the paper is expected to contain the provisions for the structure and substance of local governance in an entirely new era. It is therefore an opportunity to take some of the principles described above and codify them in English local governance.

Regardless of the scale of reforms, the paper is a chance to set out how councils can facilitate communities to self-empower. Local government units in England are already very large compared to our neighbours in Europe<sup>72</sup> and communities could end up even further removed from their council after proposed reforms. If the paper does indicate an increase in the scale of local government, whether through unitarisation of two-tier local authorities, the creation of an additional layer through combined authorities, or both, then the need for double devolution will be even greater. In the recovery and rebuilding of the national economy, we must not create any more 'left behind' communities, nor leave those already neglected by policy and practice lagging even further. The white paper could, if ambitious enough, make explicit the role of local government as part of a facilitative local state, where autonomy and self-empowerment are enabled as a matter of process.

To do so, the route to double devolution for local communities must be clearly laid out in the final legislation resulting from the white paper and ensuing debate. The importance of clear lines of communication has been a recurring theme throughout this report, and any reform to local government in England would do well to give statutory heft to this principle by making it a requirement of local authorities. Beyond this, there are 'oven-ready' options available to begin charting this course.

Extending the parish council powers first established under New Labour, to include the right for communities to form 'pop-up parishes' or Community Improvement Districts, would be a major step towards creating a facilitative local state. In light of the pandemic and the community response, new scales of service delivery should be considered. The paper has the potential to lay the groundwork for the Kruger report's recommendation of a Community Power Act which allows third sector organisations and charities to carry out elements of service delivery, by enshrining and delineating the facilitative role of the local state. The paper is an opportunity to begin a discussion on community power in service delivery and set out the process for situations where communities are willing and able to design and deliver local services – either in partnership with the council or autonomously.

At the very least, the white paper presents an opportunity to redress some of the issues with previous legislation and provide an evidence-based update to the Localism Act 2011. The issues with Community Rights, around capacity and resourcing, must be resolved, particularly after the crucial role played by

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72 Copus (2017) – Could local government govern? Rethinking the role of councillors

community hub spaces in managing the pandemic. The onus previously placed on communities to come together and save local spaces should be replaced by one of assumed protection, with the public sector in the position of justifying the removal of an asset. Whilst potentially beyond the purview of the white paper, the establishment of a community wealth fund, which has been called for by multiple organisations across sectors<sup>73</sup>, would be a suitable companion to a genuine programme of double devolution. The combined impact of correcting the problem with asset transfer and establishing a wealth fund would be powerful evidence for residents that local social infrastructure and community control is as important as the big-ticket infrastructure and city-region devolution attached to the Levelling Up agenda.

Tied to all of this is the question of resourcing. In a time of extreme fiscal strain on the state, there is an argument that the things described above are unaffordable luxuries. But this would be to ignore the lessons from the pandemic, the most significant social and economic upheaval since the Second World War. Ultimately, the arguments for a strong vein of double devolution and subsidiarity in the Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper are ones of fairness and resilience. Local social infrastructure and neighbourhood-level organisation helped us survive the pandemic. To acknowledge this and to shore up national resilience, legislation must pave the way for an expansion of community power and investment in social infrastructure.

## The Planning White Paper

The Government's 'Planning for the Future' White Paper was released in August 2020 and launched a consultation which lasted until the end of October. A radical statement of intent on reforming the planning system<sup>74,75</sup>, the paper contained several points of note for community influence on local planning. The paper has caused considerable consternation among local authorities, with the Local Government Association refuting the paper's apparent blaming of councils for planning delays<sup>76</sup> and Conservative councillors predicting electoral suicide if the reforms were implemented<sup>77</sup>. From organisations representing the community sector, there has been a more muted response, with the need for greater detail on proposals cited and a cautious welcoming of certain elements, providing they are developed correctly<sup>78,79</sup>. Some of these elements are worth expounding here, in light of our international case studies.

The need for sustained and meaningful community engagement, highlighted in Toronto and Chile, could be far better represented in the next iteration of government planning policy. The current proposals would restrict engagement to a six-month period, after which even a token consultative approach to the community would be unnecessary for developers and councils. Both the aforementioned case studies have seen results from continued, responsive local engagement.

The question of capacity is particularly pressing in the realm of planning.

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73 Local Trust – Community Wealth Fund Alliance [webpage]

74 Planning Resource (2020) – White paper's "radical" reforms and likely disruption to planning system not justified, former Supreme Court judge warns

75 Dezeen (2020) – UK government reveals full extent of "radical" planning reform proposals

76 Local Government Association (2020) – LGA responds to Government 'Planning for the Future' proposal

77 Guardian (2020) – Tory councillors in revolt over plans to accelerate housebuilding

78 National Community Land Trust Network (2020) – An initial response to the government's Planning White Paper

79 Locality (2020) – Will new planning reforms enhance or diminish community power?

Neighbourhood plans are rightly reinforced in the paper, but the need to build local capacity to engage with the process must be stressed if the policy is to deliver true community control. The dogged commitment to citizen engagement and information displayed in the Seville participatory budget process, for example, would be a start. Even this would need to be well thought through and locally nuanced, however, as the broader process of local plan consultation often excludes deprived communities by relying overly on digital approaches to consultation which assume access to a laptop or tablet<sup>80</sup>.

As ever, financial capacity is also a concern, with the proposed changes to the Community Infrastructure Levy a major point of contention. The changes as proposed would scrap the existing levy and replace it with a single Infrastructure Levy, which would simultaneously replace Section 106 planning obligations such as affordable housing provisions. This levy would be attached to land value, with a minimum value floor, which would give a clear advantage to the regions of the country with higher land values, particularly London and the South East. In addition, the levy would not be applied until new developments were actually occupied, rather than when works commenced. Together, these changes could potentially repeat the mistake of previous community-focused policy by leaving behind communities without significant resources.

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80 Local Trust (2019) – Left behind? Understanding communities on the edge

## 6. Creating powerful communities

Over the course of this report, key principles for creating powerful communities have been identified. This section recaps those principles, as well as some pitfalls to be avoided, before presenting some short and long term policy recommendations for the Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper and beyond.

### Key principles

- Strong political commitment
- Appropriate financial resources
- A relational approach to governance.
- Strong networking and communication systems.
- Dedication to building capacity.
- Work rooted in listening to communities
- A willingness to cede some power and control
- A culture that is engaged and facilitative

### To be avoided

- Inaccessible bureaucracy
- Lack of long-term consideration
- Underfunding of services
- Tokenistic participation

## Policy recommendations

- **The Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper should codify the role of councils in a facilitative local state by beginning the process of creating clear, statutory pathways to community autonomy.**
  - The white paper should identify areas of service delivery that could be co-designed, run in partnership or devolved entirely to the neighbourhood-level, particularly if the size of local authorities is to increase with reforms.
  - A statutory role should be created in local authorities for managing double devolution and community relations, to act as a single point of contact and information for community groups looking to establish forms of local control.
  - Building on previous work from London Councils and Danny Kruger MP, the ‘pop-up parish’ or Community Improvement District model should be extended as a statutory community right alongside the previous rights established in the Localism Act 2011.
  - Pathways should be developed for communities to take control of non-core service spending at neighbourhood level through initiatives like the People’s Budget in Frome.
- **To enshrine the principle of double devolution and expand upon the Localism Act’s establishment of Community Rights, the Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper should extend these rights to give the community greater power over local assets and social infrastructure.**
  - All assets that qualify as having community value under the current system should be designated as social infrastructure.
  - If a community group decides to take on a community asset, they should be supported, both procedurally and financially, in their endeavours to do so.
- **The introduction of localised lockdowns has further emphasised the importance of front-line action from community groups. The government should urgently renew and extend financial support for voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations to respond to the pandemic, particularly as the reintroduction of lockdown measures escalates.**
  - To ensure fast and targeted response, a fund could be distributed to community organisations by local councils in lockdown areas in a manner similar to the distribution of the pandemic-related Small Business Grant Fund
  - As with the Small Business Grant Fund, the focus should be on rescue at any cost for the sake of national resilience, and the overall fund should be matched to need rather than to a specific cash limit.

- **In order to strengthen social infrastructure, and properly resource endeavours to empower communities in a manner that is participatory and gets results, central government should commit to establishing a Community Wealth Fund**

- The fund would specifically target the social and civic infrastructure of 'left behind' neighbourhoods across the country. It would be an independent endowment that would be distributed over the course of 10-15 years, include investment at the hyperlocal level, decision-making would be community-led and, as part of the package, support would be provided in order to build and sustain the social capital of communities and their capacity to be involved. Recently, this call for a hyperlocal focused funding of £2bn was echoed by Danny Kruger MP in his proposal for a 'Levelling Up Communities Fund'.



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