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## OTHER IDEAS

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# Centralisation, local decline and the future of community power

By Callin McLinden

# About Localis

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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

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# Contents

	Introduction	2
<b>1</b>	Done to, not with: recent history	4
	From the Big Society to Levelling Up	4
	Community empowerment: the current approach	6
	The consequences of central control	9
	The collapse of the traditional vote	11
<b>2</b>	Double devolution: Towards meaningful empowerment	12
	Policy mechanisms	13
	Participatory processes	14
	Co-management of public assets	17
	Resource and capacity	20
<b>3</b>	Conclusion: From delegation to democracy	23



# Introduction

Across England, a quiet, corrosive crisis of governance has been unfolding. Communities are fraying considerably—not only from the compounding, lasting pressures of austerity, stagnant wages, and hollowed-out public services, but from something less tangible and insidious if not pushed back against with meaningful legislative reform. This is an increasingly pervasive sense that power has drifted almost completely out of their hands. Local high streets decline, bus routes vanish, and councils continue to stagger under the weight of impossible budgets and social care responsibilities, while those most affected are offered little recourse or redress. The result is a growing democratic deficit, one felt most acutely in neighbourhoods that lack even the illusion of agency. It is into this widening vacuum that a renewed populist energy has entered, one that can name the problem, i.e. ‘the system does not work for you’, but too often offers scapegoats in place of solutions.

The latest vessel for such populist energy is the Reform party, which has tapped into this disaffection with a simple, resonant, and increasingly effective narrative: the UK is broken and the political class could not care less. The discontent at the core of their rise is not arbitrary, it is the direct outcome of decades of overtly centralised governance cloaked in the rhetoric of localism. Slogans like 'levelling up' and 'taking back control' have promised empowerment but delivered only management. At best, reforms towards deepening local democracy have been slow, top-down, and overly bureaucratic and technical. At worst, they have functioned as camouflage for continued central control and the decline of local material conditions through austerity.

What I'd like to argue here is that without meaningful statutory provisions for double devolution, ones that enshrine pathways for communities (and indeed residents in isolation) to influence both local and national decision-making, this sense of disenfranchisement will only deepen. Democratic renewal in England must begin not with more managerialism from Whitehall or delegating such managerialism to an abstract network of regional governance, but with the tangible and, given the increasingly 'pressure cooker' nature of disenfranchisement within communities; *radical* empowerment of communities themselves.

# 1. Done to, not with: recent history

Successive governments have recognised the rising tide of popular discontent and responded, less with reform than with rhetoric. The slogans of recent years (“take back control”, “levelling up”) have not described a genuine redistribution of power but rather disguised its retention. The language of empowerment has too often served as a smokescreen for a deeper entrenchment of central authority.

## From the Big Society to Levelling Up

David Cameron’s Big Society agenda, launched in 2010, set out what would ultimately become a go-to rhetorical framework for community policy for governments to come—one that emphasised public engagement, decentralisation, and the empowerment of communities through civic responsibility, local decision-making, and voluntary action. Rooted in social capital theory, it championed the role of civil society in delivering public services, envisioning a shift away from state provision toward locally rooted, resident-led initiatives<sup>1</sup>.

However, the agenda’s professed aims were fundamentally undermined by the austerity measures implemented in parallel, which decimated the very infrastructure, both public and social, and local government capacity needed to sustain such social action and interaction. The Big Society also rested on a fundamentally flawed conception of volunteerism, assuming an equal capacity across communities to simply step in where the state was retreating due to cuts. This ignored the deep structural

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1 Watt (2010) – *Cameron promises power for the ‘main and woman on the street’*

inequalities and divergent access to time, resources, and the social capital the agenda was professed to be building. This tension between rhetorical decentralisation and practical centralisation (or outright outsourcing of public sector responsibility altogether), between the language of empowerment and reality of austerity, remained a consistent feature of successive administrations that followed.

Moreover, the trend of shorter and more volatile funding cycles over the course of the 2010s created chronic uncertainty for civil society organisations, community groups, and local public services. Without multi-year settlements, even the most well-meaning, meaningfully committed local authorities have struggled to sustain participatory mechanisms, many of which fundamentally rely on stability and trust-building over time, and Whitehall control does not exactly communicate well as a justification for half measures or pulling local participatory mechanisms altogether. As funding horizons continue to shrink, so too did the infrastructure required to retain and support bottom-up agency.

While the Big Society agenda cloaked austerity in the guise of grassroots renewal, its structural contradictions set a precedent for future community policy, in the minds of both government and the public. The Johnson government's levelling up agenda offers the clearest illustration here. Framed as a renewal of national pride and democratic integrity in so-called "left-behind" regions, the agenda promised a post-Brexit renaissance of local agency<sup>2</sup>. In practice, it delivered competitive funding pots—the Towns Fund, Levelling Up Fund—whose opaque bidding processes disempowered the very communities they purported to uplift. Far from allowing neighbourhoods to shape their futures, these funds affirmed and recentralised decision-making, with final discretion ultimately resting with ministers who disproportionately favoured constituencies of political significance for the Conservatives<sup>3</sup>.

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2 Reuters (2021) – [Reassuring his party, UK's Johnson says 'levelling up' is a "win-win"](#)

3 Hanretty (2021) – [The pork barrel politics of the Towns Fund](#)

Performance metrics, ministerial discretion, and year-on-year funding cycles have constrained local autonomy at every turn and, amidst a backdrop of material decline, saw power drift increasingly further away from neighbourhoods. These constraints did not just limit the ability of local leaders to design and deliver services, they also continued to undermine the participatory promise of devolution. In practice, performance metrics would be set by central government departments and calibrated towards narrow, short-term outputs, frequently financial rather than social in nature, rather than long-term community outcomes. As a result, local authorities and the VSCE sector alike have found themselves forced to conform to externally imposed success criteria that rarely reflected local need, undermining their capacity to co-produce services or empower residents meaningfully<sup>4</sup>—marking almost a decade of rhetorical-practical dissonance from government on community empowerment.

## Community empowerment: the current approach

The localist legacy of the fourteen years leading up to 2024 is clearest in the proliferation of combined authorities and directly elected mayors through devolution deals and the establishment of integrated funding settlements. These mechanisms, while useful in administrative terms, offer no systemic route for residents to shape policy directly. Like the Johnson government, the current Starmer government has positioned devolution to combined authorities as a national priority from its earliest days in power. Starmer's rhetoric frames devolution as a necessary correction, a means of restoring trust and rebalancing a lopsided state. Yet this model risks reproducing the same central flaw; power passed to local government, but rarely *through* it to the communities they serve.

Labour's early moves suggested a seemingly more coherent ambition, though an equivocation of community empowerment with what is essentially local government reorganisation persists—particularly in absence of specifically community-related policy nuance. Nonetheless, the English Devolution white paper did promise a “permanent shift” in

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4     Dudman (2021) – [The human cost of centralisation](#)



the balance of power<sup>5</sup>—an explicit acknowledgement that the centre has continued to hoard authority for too long—and the government has moved to deliver multi-year funding settlements for councils. The language is bolder and the intent more grounded in principle, subtly gesturing to a broader vision articulated by *A New Britain*, a 2022 report by the Brown Commission on the UK's future<sup>6</sup>.

More recent policy developments, including the Plan for Neighbourhoods<sup>7</sup> and the introduction of trailblazer neighbourhoods<sup>8</sup>, do suggest a cautious but notable shift in the government's approach to neighbourhood-level empowerment. Positioned as a corrective to the piecemeal and competitive funding models of the past, these initiatives are framing themselves as a “clean break” from top-down delivery, with a stated ambition to devolve power, budgets, and decision-making directly to communities<sup>9</sup>. The proposed establishment of Neighbourhood Boards and a ten-year strategy to support 350 of the most deprived areas mark a rhetorical recentring of neighbourhoods within national policy. However, while the tone and stated intent, moving from delivery *management* to delivery *support*, are encouraging, the scale of intervention remains limited, and key questions around legal mechanisms, resourcing, and sustained accountability are yet to be addressed. As such, these developments represent an important opening but by the same token fall significantly short of the systemic change necessary to empower communities and neighbourhoods after a tiresome decade of community empowerment rhetoric from government and contradictory results on the ground.

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5 MHCLG (2024) – [English Devolution White Paper](#)

6 Labour (2022) – [A New Britain: Renewing our democracy and rebuilding our economy](#)

7 MHCLG (2025) – [Plan for Neighbourhoods: prospectus](#)

8 MHCLG (2025) – [Government announces 25 “trailblazer neighbourhoods” to receive long-term investment](#)

9 MHCLG (2025) – [Plan for Neighbourhoods: prospectus](#)

Yet the architecture remains incomplete. While the English Devolution and Community Empowerment bill is a welcome addition to the devolution agenda, there are still no general statutory requirements within the bill for strategic authorities (or indeed any local authorities) to meaningfully engage communities or residents directly, with specific community empowerment provisions limited to a more expansive definition of ‘assets of community value’ and the admittedly very welcome introduction of the ‘Community Right to Buy’. For talk of ‘giving communities the tools they need to deliver growth’, there is a distinct lack of guarantees to this end within the bill. Without such guarantees, a shift from national to regional management may merely redraw the map of centralisation; a network of Whitehalls, if you will. However, clause 58 does impose a statutory duty for local authorities to establish ‘effective governance structures’ for neighbourhood areas. While not committing to it outright, this certainly opens up the latent potential for some power to be devolved further downward than the typical local authority level. To this end, community engagement could be mandated within neighbourhood areas *if specified by regulations and the Secretary of State*, but this is contingent and by no means automatic—with top-down control remaining predominant. Of course, local authorities can do this voluntarily, but the absence of a substantive statutory requirement for community participation in decision-making leaves genuine community power down to local political will and the only binding mechanisms are those that *might* be introduced via future regulations, not the authorities themselves.

This begs the question, if community empowerment is the goal, why not have local authorities themselves consult neighbourhoods (or representatives of) on options for their own governance and *then* present such proposals to the Secretary of State for approval? Almost total ministerial contingency and discretion on what constitutes an appropriate neighbourhood-level governance structure, with little to no required input from those who are to be governed by such structures or guarantee of any participatory mechanisms after the fact, risks deepening the sense of disenfranchisement and powerlessness amongst communities despite more rhetoric of empowerment. However, a mandate for neighbourhood-level governance structures to become a universal feature (rather than

just an optional extra) is not to be undermined and, coupled with the new Community Right to Buy, do nonetheless begin to build a statutory framework for community empowerment with great potential and room for local democratic innovations.

Nevertheless, much of the community empowerment provisions found within this bill specifically are still indirect, discretionary, or procedural. Central government still holds the keys to every lock, undermining the ethos of community empowerment and a and the stated aim of 'permanent shift in the balance of power'. Thus, the government still runs the risk of even more rhetorical devolution with practical centralisation on matters of community power, where communities may see governance shift closer to home, but still only on terms set far-removed in Whitehall, as it stands.

Real devolution requires more than reallocating responsibilities or neighbourhood governance from the top-down. It demands mechanisms for participation, tools for accountability, and rights that are not merely promised but protected in law and active in practice. Without these, there is a continued risk of building a new technocracy that further alienates communities.

## **The consequences of central control**

The effects of such persistent centralisation are not abstract, they are lived, visible, and becoming increasingly corrosive. Across England, local governance is no longer experienced as stewardship but rather as managed decline punctuated by outright imposition. Over a decade's worth of relentless austerity has seen councils carry the burden of statutory duties without the autonomy or resource base to meet them. As a result, high streets have deteriorated, bus routes have vanished, libraries and youth centres gone from neighbourhoods—each shuttered building ultimately a policy decision made elsewhere.

But the damage runs deeper than infrastructure and material conditions. This system of centralised control, and the intensification of appropriating systemic critiques in rhetoric but delivering little in practice, has worn away people's sense of political efficacy. Decisions are made in rooms they cannot enter, through processes they have no influence over, in an overtly

bureaucratic, public management language they are not familiar with. Over time, participation wanes, not because of apathy alone but because of exhaustion with the assumed capacity expected of them to exercise any of their currently ascribed community rights.

The post-2010 turn toward community-led delivery, asset transfers and volunteer-run services was particularly egregious in its outsourcing of responsibility without transferring power or building capacity. It instead presumed capacity without investing in it, with neighbourhoods becoming administrative zones rather than political spaces, stripped of the sort of civic engagement that sustains a sense of local agency by residents and communities. When residents are invoked and asked to engage but the barriers to engagement are so high and still nothing changes, disillusionment is not irrational—it's an inevitability. This is a particularly acute dynamic in coastal and post-industrial communities but is now far from confined to them. According to the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods, the perception of local decline now cuts across geography and class<sup>10</sup>. Even in affluent areas, many feel their neighbourhoods have worsened.

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10 [ICON \(2025\) – Think Neighbourhoods: A new approach to fixing the country's biggest policy challenges](#)



### The collapse of the traditional vote

Into the void left by Westminster's democratic neglect steps a new insurgency. Reform UK's local electoral success in 2025, securing over 40 percent of contested local seats and eclipsing both Labour and the Conservatives in overall vote share, speaks to a volatile hunger for disruption to politics as usual<sup>11</sup>. Reform's rise is not an aberration but a further step towards political fragmentation in a context of widespread disillusionment. In the 2025 local elections, three in five people did not vote for the party who won in any area<sup>12</sup> and between 50 and 75 percent of eligible voters simply did not vote—demonstrating that widespread political disenfranchisement and apathy is a nationwide condition.

The shift away from the two-party system reveals what happens when democratic institutions are left to wither and local governance is hollowed out. Reform's core message is simple: the system does not work for you, and we are the only ones willing to say so when others won't. However, beneath this narrative fluency is yet to emerge a programme for genuine community empowerment, with a commitment to participatory structures, subsidiarity, or democratic reform. If the two parties which have been dominant for the past century of British politics wish to retain their hegemony, they should aim to provide a means for people to gain a sense of empowerment over their surroundings. If insurgent challengers—from Reform UK to the Green Party—seek to succeed as genuine governing parties, then they too must develop policy to address disempowerment beyond its electoral weaponisation.

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11 Bunting (2025) – UK local elections delivered record-breaking fragmentation of the vote

12 Bunting (2025) – Ibid

## 2. Double devolution: Towards meaningful empowerment

To stem this tide and begin rebuilding democratic legitimacy across neighbourhoods, the government must move beyond slogans towards statute. The democratic deficit in England is no longer a quiet problem, coupled with evident material decline, it is a structural emergency. What is needed now is not another fund, strategy, or pilot—but a constitutional reordering of power rooted in genuine subsidiarity.

This is the core demand of the *We're Right Here campaign*<sup>13</sup>: a statutory framework that can accompany the English Devolution bill by enshrining a principle of double devolution into law. In contrast to typical models that simply transfer, or more aptly, *delegate* power from Whitehall to local authorities<sup>14</sup>, double devolution passes power further through councils to communities themselves. It seeks to operationalise the principle of subsidiarity, which holds that decisions should be taken at the most immediate and proximate level consistent with their effective resolution—with 'Community Covenants' and a suite of policy mechanisms critical for this effect<sup>15</sup>.

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13 We're Right Here – [Who we are](#)

14 Wall & Vilela (2016) – [Deal or no deal: English devolution, a top-down approach](#)

15 Marshall (2007) – [Nesting, subsidiarity, and community-based environmental governance beyond the local scale](#)

## Policy mechanisms

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill formally designated ‘Strategic Authorities’ as the primary vehicles for future devolution across England. Tasked with overseeing a fairly broad suite of powers—including transport, infrastructure, employment and skills, housing, regeneration, climate action, and public service reform—these authorities are positioned as the central tier through which devolved funding and strategic governance will now flow. The includes the move, detailed in the June 2025 Spending Review, towards Integrated Settlements: multi-year funding arrangements tied to clear strategic outcomes, intended to replace the fragmented competitive bidding of the past.

While the government’s approach to devolution is distinctly regional, its emphasis on creating larger, unitary governance footprints and shifting Whitehall’s role from delivery to support does create space for community empowerment initiatives.

However, despite the title of the bill suggesting a transformative agenda for community empowerment, the actual provisions fall well short of systemic community empowerment. There are positive signals, particularly around asset protections and neighbourhood governance, and the legal basis for a ‘Community Right to Buy’ is a particularly promising highlight, but much of the provisions are contingent on regulations yet to be written, dependent on central ministerial discretion, and unfunded in their current form.

If structured with the right mechanisms that work to meaningfully institutionalise community empowerment, strategic authorities and forthcoming neighbourhood governance structures could both become key conduits for genuine community empowerment. However, this possibility continues to remain conditional on political whim, relative capacity, and institutional design; the formal architecture as it stands does not guarantee downward devolution automatically, this is still fundamentally a matter of political and organisational will, but it nonetheless opens the space for it.

To this end, government should go further and place strategic authorities under legal obligation, not mere encouragement, to co-produce decisions with residents, or at the very least, the new neighbourhood governance structures they will be represented by. Power-sharing agreements between councils and community-based, civil society organisations must become standard, not exceptional, and the capacity for neighbourhoods to set-up such organisations must be actively supported by central government. To this end, such obligations should guarantee local rights to:

- **Initiate participatory processes** in local budgeting, planning and health policy decisions.
- **Co-manage public assets**, with additional support for those in areas of deprivation.
- **Draw down multi-year funding**, independent of competitive bidding with accompanying investment advice.

## Participatory processes

Research on a wealth of international examples of participatory processes, some with influence over local economic strategies, has demonstrated their effectiveness when well-disseminated and effectively managed, particularly within municipal areas. For example, evidence from participatory budgeting processes in Buenos Aires<sup>16</sup>, across 221 South Korean municipal authorities<sup>17</sup>, and Brussels and Wallonia within Belgium, have all demonstrated the efficacy of participatory budgeting in enhancing government responsiveness and transparency, improving trust in government from the broader population, and achieving notable improvements in administrative efficiency and fiscal sustainability.

In the contentious area of community control over planning and regeneration, a study of participatory planning in Lisbon shows clear

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16 Ardanaz et al. (2022) – [Does citizen participation in budget allocation pay? A survey experiment on political trust and participatory governance](#)

17 Jung (2021) – [Participatory budgeting and government efficiency: Evidence from municipal governments in South Korea](#)



evidence of “institutional learning and democratic openness”<sup>18</sup> and a study of the participatory regeneration of Shanghai neighbourhoods provides instructive nuance, with facilitating mechanisms being regular consultation meetings, the regulation of participatory procedures, and flexible private funding provision, while constraining mechanisms included administrative constraints in mobilising other government departments and strict arrangements for public funding provision<sup>19</sup>.

On matters of participatory health governance, there is also strong international precedent. In Brazil, municipal authorities with ‘participatory health councils’ saw 14 percent lower HIV/AIDS prevalence than others, with health coverage, local government capacity, and municipal per capita health spending also associated with lower prevalence<sup>20</sup>. Thailand’s ‘National Health Assembly’ model has enabled a stronger civil society capacity to engage with the national health policy-making process, with researchers crediting the model’s ‘provision of balanced, factual information’, ‘inclusion of diverse perspectives’, and the ‘opportunity to reflect on and discuss freely a wide spectrum of perspectives’—all contributing significantly to the institutionalisation of participation across Thailand on health matters, though ensuring the link between the assembly and the decision-making of the ‘highest political circles’ was deemed its most critical challenge<sup>21</sup>.

What these examples demonstrate is that no matter what the political stripe, structure or size of authorities and their populations, participatory processes (whether through assemblies, forums, or integrated consultation, et cetera) build trust, improve responsiveness, and can deliver improved outcomes, and that, if challenges can be overcome effectively, the potential of participatory processes to engage and empower residents and communities on many matters of strategic governance is palpable and arguably a desperate missing link in the UK’s community policy.

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18 Medeiros (2022) – [Urban participatory planning approaches in capital cities: The Lisbon case](#)

19 Wang (2024) – [Achieving neighborhood-level collaborative governance through participatory regeneration: Cases of three residential heritage neighborhoods in Shanghai](#)

20 Touchton et al. (2023) – [Participatory Health Governance and HIV/AIDS in Brazil](#)

21 Rajan (2019) – [Institutionalising participatory health governance: Lessons from nine years of the National Health Assembly model in Thailand](#)

## The UK context

While there is some precedent for participatory budgeting in the UK, notably in the London Borough of Newham, and a brief history of government trialling the idea in the 2000s, its inclusion as a statutory function seems a remote possibility in the current context. Nevertheless, many of the aforementioned studies tout the successes of participatory budgeting with wards or neighbourhoods as their level of analysis, tacitly suggesting that such initiatives could thrive within upcoming neighbourhood governance structures.

Local participation in planning is far more developed, however this has increasingly been characterised by ministers as a negative, with the Planning and Infrastructure Bill explicitly targeted to take on “the blockers” of development at local level. A more constructive approach would be to make planning *more* open to the wider community by lowering barriers to participation through the use of digital tools and other innovative approaches.

While the UK’s track record for community involvement in health policy is limited, the new NHS 10 year plan marks an attempt to “reintegrate healthcare into the social fabric of places” through co-location of voluntary sector and NHS services as well as increasing support for community health and peer to peer workers. The challenge will be ensuring that double devolution can occur in a health service that has consistently struggled to decentralise.

## Co-management of public assets

One of Europe's most influential innovations in the collaborative governance of public assets is the movement for 'urban commons'; one that has had success as far afield as New York and Hong Kong<sup>22</sup>. The movement started in the Italian city of Turin where the Co-City project, enabled by the 2015 'Bologna regulation'<sup>23</sup>, established an institutional framework for the co-management of underutilised public spaces in partnership with community groups, with the explicit aim of regenerating deprived neighbourhoods and tackling 'socio-spatial polarisation'<sup>24</sup>. The project was undergirded by the use of 'pacts of collaboration'—legally binding agreements between the municipal authority and organised residents or associations to jointly manage a given space or facility. Since implementation, Turin has signed over 50 of these pacts with various groups to transform vacant lots, abandoned buildings, and public land into vibrant community-run hubs, including new community gardens, a co-managed urban farm, and the 'Cumiana15' hub, where a formerly derelict, post-industrial building is now a hybrid cultural and social centre co-governed by local associations and the municipal government.

The institutional depth of Turin's Co-City project is of particular importance. The project, early in development, established a dedicated interdepartmental unit and worked with the University of Turin to develop the commons governance framework that was put in place. Over the life of the project, this approach has now been mainstreamed into municipal policy; multiple departments now engage with active citizens via such pacts and over 200 civic organisations participated. Residents reported an increased mutual trust and sense of ownership over such spaces, while government officers saw Co-City as "unlocking the potential of urban development" through the empowerment of residents<sup>25</sup>. The model was

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22 [Sham \(2017\) – Imagining a new urban commons: Heritage preservation as/and community movements in Hong Kong](#)

23 [Horvat \(2019\) – Real democracy in your town: Public-civic partnerships in action](#)

24 [Iaione \(2019\) – The CO-CITY project Journal N° 4](#)

25 [Urbact \(2022\) – Co-City: The collaborative management of urban commons to counteract poverty and socio-spatial polarisation](#)

robust enough that it survived a change in municipal governing party and continues beyond its piloting phase. To top it off, strategically, Turin's experience contributed to a broader adoption of the 'urban commons' model, including over 180 Italian cities as well as some municipalities across the rest of Europe and beyond, thus illustrating a scalable, institutionalised form of public asset co-management between a local authority and its communities.

Ghent's experience with public-civic asset partnerships also highlights the transformative potential of community-driven collaborative partnerships. A notable example of such is the city's co-management of the Saint-Joseph Church, a deconsecrated building in a low-income, diverse neighbourhood. The initiative, launched in 2019, saw the city invite civic groups to propose uses for the church, ultimately selecting a nonprofit to oversee its transformation into a community hub. This approach involved not only the physical repurposing of the building but also the creation of a democratic governance model that actively included local residents in decision-making processes. The project's success was evidenced by increased cross-departmental collaboration within the municipality and the establishment of a permanent task force to replicate this model for other underused properties within the city-region<sup>26</sup>. The partnership not only revitalised a local space but also fostered a sense of ownership and social cohesion toward a common goal amongst residents.

These experiences, and many more the world over, offer key lessons for the UK; namely, the importance of institutional flexibility and a collaborative approach to asset management and regeneration, ensuring relevant governance structures are responsive to needs while maintaining a broadening democratic accountability. This suggests that, with proper investment and support, and the statutory mandate to engage on such matters, strategic authorities in the UK could facilitate more inclusive, participatory urban development and management, particularly in disadvantaged, disempowered areas.

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26 Horvat (2019) – *Real democracy in your town: Public-civic partnerships in action*



## The UK context

The assets of community value and 'Community Right to Buy' provisions of the English Devolution bill strengthen the legal scaffold for community participation in the fate of valued assets. While co-management is by no means prescribed, the combination of these reforms and neighbourhood governance powers (if devolved meaningfully downward) provides a potential policy opening for more progressive local authorities and community groups to follow in the footsteps of European counterparts to develop shared stewardship models. If the accompanying regulations are ambitious enough, and if adequate enough capacity-building and resource is forthcoming, this could spark a shift from symbolic inclusion to practical community empowerment in asset management.

Similarly, the Community Land Trust (CLT) model—enabled by the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 and supported through a patchwork of the Affordable Homes Programme (previously the Community Housing Fund until 2020), neighbourhood planning (enabled under the Localism Act 2011), the right to bid and other community asset transfer rights, and Homes England support—provides a statutory, community-led mechanism for owning, developing, and managing assets and land in perpetuity for public benefit, with practical focus typically centering around the management of homes and community infrastructure. While not always explicitly framed as 'co-management' in the policy language, CLTs nevertheless enable a practical form of co-governance: bridging communities and local authorities through joint responsibility, participatory processes, and long-term stewardship. Their efficacy in practice is very promising, to name a few key examples: Lyme Regis CLT (Dorset) has developed affordable homes for residents priced out by second homes, St Minver CLT (Cornwall) has partnered with a housing association to deliver mixed-tenure homes on donated land, and Granby Four Streets CLT (Liverpool) has been involved in the reclaiming of derelict housing through co-design with residents.

The English Devolution bill's introduction of the Community Right to Buy, extension of community asset transfer rights, and inclusion of a much more expansive definition of community assets (now including land and sporting assets) is set to strengthen the legislative and systemic support for CLTs. For their proliferation to take hold country-wide, further cultural shifts toward reaching out to and trusting communities within local authorities will need to be encouraged, and further funding access mechanisms to support the feasibility of CLTs, irrespective of deprivation, will be critical to their scalability.

## Resource and capacity

Crucially, communities must be resourced to participate. Talk of empowerment without capacity-building will only continue to be theatre and serve to further entrench a sense of apathy. Thus, communities require a multifaceted array: one that includes financial support, access to information, organisational structures, the building of social capital, and embedded inclusiveness will ensure that any building of community power can contribute to a local, regional, or, indeed, national framework that enables meaningful engagement and empowerment.

Research underscores the importance of capacity building, specifically the training of cultivating competencies such as leadership, strategic advocacy, and coalition building, which subsequently foster deeper engagement and higher political efficacy amongst community members<sup>27</sup>, as well as showing that communities with the strongest social capital, defined as networks of relationships amongst people, typically demonstrated higher levels of organisational and political involvement<sup>28</sup>.

A national infrastructure of community development support, including

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27 Black & Sykes (2022) – [Steps toward engagement integrity: Learning from participatory visual methods in marginalized South African communities](#)

28 Ying (2025) – [The mediating effects of counter-attitudinal exposure, political knowledge, and trust in government on community connectedness](#)

training, digital access, and base funding, therefore must be developed to support upcoming and future statutory and non-statutory changes. Central government, must also be willing to be held democratically accountable through such a framework. Where national policies materially impact localities, relevant ministerial departments must be legally required to contact and consult affected communities, not through tick-box consultations, but through genuine outreach and collaborative design and co-implementation with those who are ready and able. Without such guarantees, 'localism' remains a euphemism for delegation without democracy; a façade that will continue to disempower.

### The UK context

Regarding the capacity and funding for the English Devolution bill's new Community Right to Buy and neighbourhood governance clauses, a legal basis for resourcing such provisions is completely omitted which, whilst perhaps conventional, begs the question of where the necessary capacity and resourcing of community empowerment adjacent provisions is likely to come from. To this end, funding could come from dedicated central grants (e.g. an expanded Community Ownership Fund; ideally rewired in light of the new right to buy), mainstreamed initiatives (e.g. the UKSPF's 'communities and place' investment strand), and the redirection of devolved budgets by regional leaders to the neighbourhood level.

On capacity-building, bodies such as Locality and the NALC, plus new Neighbourhood Boards and the forthcoming neighbourhood governance structures themselves, will need the resources to train local volunteers and staff to develop and sustain engagement. By making such funding streams and support structures available across all of England's strategic authorities, as and when they come into fruition, the government can hardwire community empowerment into the way places are governed from the get go within the legislative framework they have already set out.

Promising to this effect, the governance has launched a Plan for Neighbourhoods programme, wherein which 75 'left-behind' towns and neighbourhoods are being selected to receive "funding and support totalling up to £20 million" over 10 years, with a 75/25 capital-revenue split respectively<sup>29</sup>. The money is touted to be used to establish new Neighbourhood Boards of residents and stakeholders, who, in partnership with their local council, will design 10-year Regeneration Plan for their respective areas—perhaps providing a glimpse of where appropriate neighbourhood governance structures could also find their inception. While currently a pilot, if successful, this model could be expanded, blowing the door wide open for multi-year devolved neighbourhood renewal funds to be managed by community-led boards; a potent combination of capital and capacity-building funding.

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29 MHCLG (2025) – [Plan for Neighbourhoods: prospectus](#)

### 3. Conclusion: From delegation to democracy

The centralised governance model that has defined England since at least the 1990s is not simply inefficient, it has become corrosive. It has delivered institutional incoherence, economic stagnation, and a pervasive democratic malaise. Most crucially, it has bred a slow-burning civic despair: a sense that power has never been so remote, unresponsive, and indifferent to the everyday texture of neighbourhood life. Politics, for many, is no longer participatory, but something done to them, by those far away, coveted in bureaucratic language not their own.

It is this terrain on which reactionary populism thrives. If this Labour government is serious about rebalancing power and rebuilding the public realm—and indeed, about retaining power beyond this parliament—it must do more than speak of control. It must relinquish it statutorily. The government must legislate for subsidiarity and treat communities not as clients or administrative divisions, but as co-producers of a renewed democratic project.

What is at stake is more than just Labour's political legitimacy, it is the very idea that democracy lives close to home, residing in councils, places, and neighbourhoods. Without such a renewal, there is a serious risk of ceding the future to those who offer rage in place of results.

Thus, the path to kick the can down is running out and England now stands at a fork. One direction leads back toward a technocratic centre, potentially efficient, procedural, but ultimately hollow and disenfranchising people en masse. The other leads outward: to neighbourhoods, participation, to a democracy lived as something tangible and shared. The first is well-worn and crumbling, while the second remains underbuilt, full of promise. But it is only in the second direction that renewal can take hold.







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