

# How can neighbourhoods be understood and defined?

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# About this paper

This is a review of what is and is not known about neighbourhoods and communities. It starts to analyse the characteristics of neighbourhoods, including how they are defined and the role of the local public realm in bringing them together. It sketches some approaches, lessons and issues for community empowerment and governance, and frames questions for the future.

This paper was first published by the Young Foundation in 2006 as part of the Transforming Neighbourhoods programme. It has been updated and revised for publication in 2010.

Transforming Neighbourhoods was a research and innovation consortium on neighbourhood governance and empowerment that ran from 2006 to 2008. It brought together government departments, community and research organisations. Partners included the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Home Office, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, CABE, The Community Alliance and 15 local authorities including Birmingham, Camden, Haringey, Knowsley, Lewisham, Liverpool, Newham, Sheffield, Staffordshire, Suffolk, Surrey, Tower Hamlets, Wakefield, Waltham Forest and Wiltshire.

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# Why the interest in neighbourhoods?

## Policy Context

The idea of empowering people to shape or make decisions in their neighbourhoods is gathering momentum in the UK and around the world. Done well, the devolution of powers to the very local level can improve the quality of decision-making and levels of citizen engagement, helping to rebuild legitimacy, make bureaucracies more responsive and develop new sources of social value. Done badly, it can lead to conflict, growing inequalities and failing public services.

In the UK, the Prime Minister and leaders across the spectrum have made it clear that empowering neighbourhoods is a priority for the future, and new powers are mooted. Much attention is being focused on neighbourhood policing, and recent ODPM-Home Office publications speak of placing more power in the hands of local communities, wider democratic arrangements for neighbourhoods and a “Neighbourhoods Charter”.

This is welcome, and marks a big shift. It represents an acknowledgement that the UK has become one of the most centralised of the OECD countries. Our lowest tier of executive government is at an average population of 118,500, when for international comparators the figures are below 10,000. We have far fewer elected representatives per head of population, and our citizens have less experience of participatory governance.

### Parallel work programmes

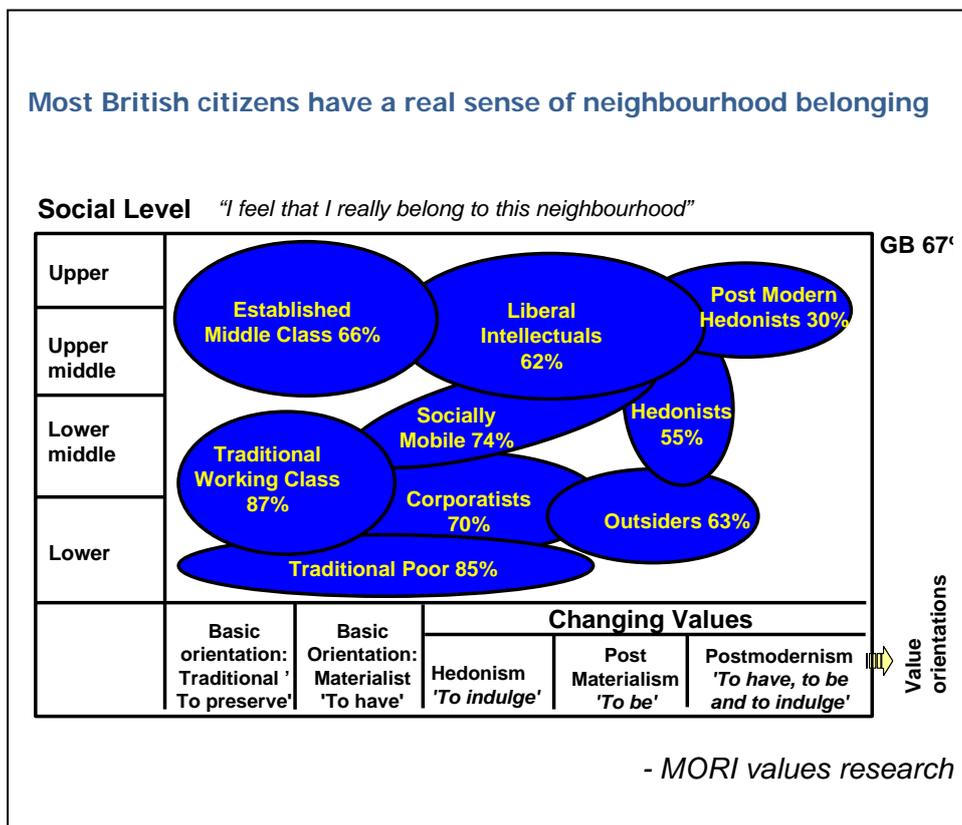
- The national consultation on neighbourhoods led by ODPM
- The Balance of Funding review
- Civic Pioneers and other local government innovation networks
- Neighbourhood renewal
- CABE research on neighbourhoods
- ESRC Centre for Neighbourhood Research and other academic networks
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation findings
- Et cetera...

But a great deal more work now needs to be done to clarify what works, to design workable new models and to put them into practice. A series of experiments in community participation, often dictated centrally, have had mixed results. When devolution fragments responsibility, it can make engagement harder rather than easier. But experience points to many practical ways to devolve power right down to very local levels while minimising risk. In many countries in Europe and beyond, ward-level communes raise their own taxes or run a range of services, even

hospitals. The participative budget of Porto Alegre in Brazil, rooted in neighbourhood, has been adopted in many countries. Closer to home we find promising seeds such as Birmingham’s neighbourhood forums and Milton Keynes’s urban parishes, and stories suggesting limitations, such as that of Tower Hamlets in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In conjunction with the 10-year vision for local government, the Balance of Funding review, and several recent government initiatives, the prospect of new ways of empowering neighbourhoods presents a fertile opportunity to shape the local governance agenda for the next decade. But many of the fundamental questions have yet to be asked, let alone answered. They demand a critical, inventive and strategic response over the next two years, with experimentation on a coordinated rather than piecemeal basis; a response that brings together local government, neighbourhood leaders and voluntary organisations to maximise the opportunities of any moves towards greater devolution and empowerment, while minimising the considerable accompanying risks.

Neighbourhood empowerment is salient to citizens: while two-thirds of people say they feel more and more remote from the big political institutions, two-thirds, including majorities from a wide range of social groups, also express strong feelings of neighbourhood identity and belonging (see box). We should not discount the one-third who do not: they are disproportionately younger and from higher social levels. It seems likely that they identify more with communities of interest than of place.



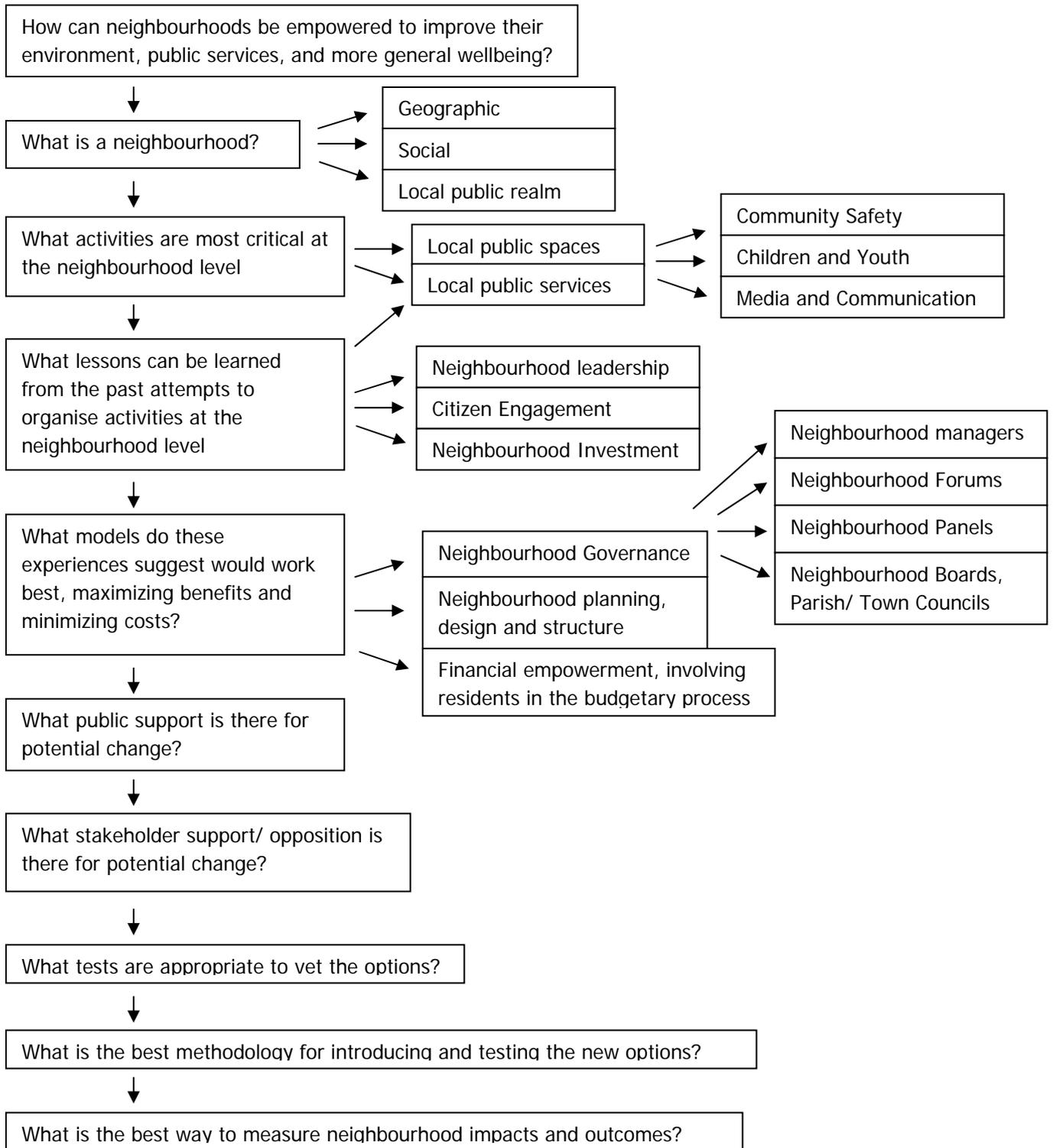
## Neighbourhood challenges

The demand for neighbourhood empowerment emerges from specific local concerns:

- Community security from violence and crime
- The quality of the environment and the street scene, dereliction, vandalism and underused public spaces
- Issues around children and learning, including childcare, primary schools, libraries, playgrounds and other facilities
- Health and sports, mutual aid, community finance and timebanks
- Threats to the community – facilities closure, planning decisions
- Deciding how to spend new money for regeneration/investment

It is frequently frustrated or discouraged by the absence of powers, budget flexibilities and citizen-friendly points of entry. It is important that any new framework addresses these blockages, responds to the ecology of ways in which collective action emerges at the very local level.

# Issues Map



**Hypotheses**  
 Opportunities for neighbourhood empowerment should be the rule, not the exception – but lead to the “blooming of a thousand flowers” across the country. Neighbourhoods should be encouraged to focus where collective choice and local variation is likely to improve public value and engagement. Good practice, clear frameworks, information-sharing and redistribution can help maintain equity.

# What is a neighbourhood?

Neighbourhoods are ultra-local communities of place. Most people feel they intuitively understand what they mean, in the shape of neighbourly interactions, mutual support, gathering places and a friendly, attractive environment – or in a “bad neighbourhood”, danger, anti-social interaction, exclusiveness, isolation and dereliction.

But rich descriptions of what neighbourhood can mean, combining a variety of physical and social characteristics, is not a definition of what it *is*. There is no consensus answer to the question, “What is a neighbourhood?” This challenges policymakers seeking to empower local communities. What are we dealing with – a street of 100 people or a ward of 10,000? What might the units be, and where does each begin or end?

Understanding of the scales, characteristics and dynamics of neighbourhoods is necessary if we are to set a framework for targeted and effective action. Otherwise we run the risk of public disappointment and policy failure.

In some areas, quasi-“natural” boundaries of geography or community already exist. Even then, the best policy definition of neighbourhoods can prove elusive. In an inner city area where an Asian-majority council estate adjoins a white-majority estate and a row of derelict warehouses turned into luxury flats, should existing communal divides be reinforced or bridged? Where several small hamlets share a school, a post office and a mobile library, are they one or several neighbourhoods? Do they work together, or (as is often the case) do they compete?

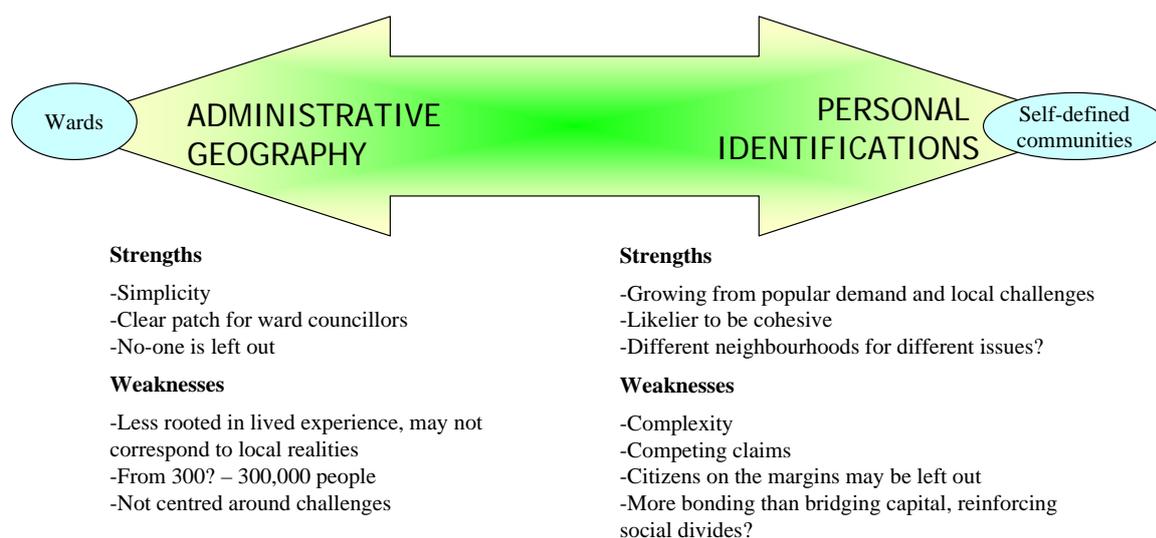
## Geographic and social neighbourhood

Two models for understanding neighbourhood currently dominate – one based on top-down administrative geography, the other on mental maps and subjective identifications. These divergent approaches can be seen here:

“The ward will often be a key unit of area in establishing and maintaining any neighbourhood arrangements. This is not, however, to define the ward as the neighbourhood. In some cases a ward might be the neighbourhood, in others the neighbourhood could be either part of a ward or an area consisting of several wards such as a parish.”

“It may be that people regard one area as their neighbourhood for certain issues and events and a different area as their neighbourhood for other purposes... Thus neighbourhoods will be essentially self-defined by the people who live in them.”

These two paragraphs stand adjacent to one another in the recent ODPM/Home Office discussion paper. But they suggest very different policy approaches to the definition of neighbourhood, each with strengths and weaknesses. Can both be pursued in parallel?



Historically accepted neighbourhood boundaries and forums exist in many cases. Elsewhere, local authorities or groups of citizens may want to carve out new forms. Pure self-identification of neighbourhoods could be complex, risky, overlapping, full of holes. Equally, ward boundaries do not always reflect the dynamics of lived experience and common problems. We need to ask: what neighbourhood frameworks make most sense from the perspective of citizen engagement, and in light of local dynamics of service provision, lived experience and public value?

## Geographic neighbourhood

Electoral wards or divisions have historically been the standard unit of local administrative geography. There has always been an element of arbitrariness in their composition, and the 10,661 UK wards average just over 5,500 residents but range from fewer than 100 to more than 30,000. Their usefulness for data collection and times series comparison has been further complicated by boundary changes. Police and health boundaries often vary.

### Scottish neighbourhood criteria

- Approximately equal population
- Approximately equal area
- Compact shape
- Social homogeneity
- Accordance with existing boundaries, including electoral wards, school catchment areas, settlement boundaries, and Community Council areas
- Accordance with features in the local environment, including rivers, hilly areas, railways and main roads
- Public acceptability

- *Scottish Executive*

The Scottish Executive's definition of neighbourhood (above) is a good instance of the administrative-geographic "data zone" approach. It is based on socially homogeneous areas of similar size with fixed boundaries, according as far as possible with existing physical and administrative boundaries. "Public acceptability" is added as a post hoc criterion. In some of these areas, a sense of community may be completely lacking and there may be no meaningful neighbourhood at all.

The UK's 2004 Neighbourhood Statistics framework seeks to correct the weaknesses of the electoral ward as a unit of data collection by establishing "Super Output Areas" (SOAs) – a set of geographical layers built up from census data, and designed to be stable over time. "Lower layer" SOAs have an average population of 1500, "middle layer" SOAs an average population of 7200. They are constrained by ward and local authority boundaries as at 2001, and assembled on the basis of proximity and social homogeneity. The relationship of SOAs to the lived experience of neighbourhoods is not direct. But the existence of this "lower layer" establishes the possibility for recombination, so that, if it makes more sense locally, data can be collected for neighbourhoods on non-ward boundaries. It is worth asking whether the neighbourhood statistics process could be accelerated, compiled together with other neighbourhood data and made available to the general public in accessible form to inform collective judgement.

Some geographic prescriptions for neighbourhood draw on social criteria, such as the New Town planners' rule of thumb that the overall size of a neighbourhood should be dictated by "the maximum walking distance for a woman with a pram", or the

New Urbanist argument that you should be able to walk across a neighbourhood in five minutes. Neighbourhood practitioners and researchers have increasingly turned to bottom-up, social or experiential criteria to understand ultra-local dynamics.

## Social neighbourhoods

People experience neighbourhoods in a variety of ways, many of which involve the presence of and interaction with other residents – “social proximity”. Some analysts employ qualitative social models that use the level of interactions between residents to distinguish “neighbourhoods”, good or bad, from generic “residential areas” where there are few or no patterned relations. Social networks and patterns of behaviour – such as childcare exchanges, gang violence, drinking in the local pub, avoiding other people’s eyes on the street or joining a local association – all shape and are shaped by the character of a neighbourhood. Social homogeneity is used as an administrative-geographic proxy for these diverse and overlapping local networks. It is relevant, but clearly inadequate to the task. Increasing transience and social diversity in many neighbourhoods presents new challenges.

Several studies indicate a strong correlation between vibrant local communities and the presence of families who have been living in the area for a long time, with

deep roots and intertwined branches. But in some areas, individuals or communities living alongside one another lead practically separate existences. Their social networks are superimposed but seldom-connected, meeting largely through friction and conflict. A recent study of estates in the UK found that 64% knew more than five people of the same housing tenure, but only 17% knew more than five people of different tenure. This pattern is also frequently seen for ethnicity and other characteristics. The neighbourhood is therefore one of the places where today’s challenge of social cohesion finds its most concrete form.

### Attributes of neighbourhoods – from geographic to social

- *Environmental* – topography, pollution
- *Proximity* – location, transport infrastructure
- *Buildings* – type, design, material, density, repair
- *Infrastructure* – roads, streetscape
- *Demography* – age profile, class status, ethnic diversity, mobility of population
- Existence and quality of *local services*
- *Social-interactive* – friend and family networks,
- local associations, informal interactions, social control mechanisms
- *Sentiment* – identification with place, historical significance, local stories
- *Political* – local parties, political networks, resident involvement

- Galster 2001, Power et al 2004

Each of us has a different sense of place, and a different library of mental maps. Our mental models of our neighbourhood are personalised by our life paths and experiences. We may not realise that a local early years centre exists until we become parents. We may not think about a neighbourhood watch area or police beat until we are mugged or burgled. Our mental maps may be defined by the catchment of our primary school, church or mosque, or equally by wider networks of friendship and kinship. This suggests bottom-up approaches to neighbourhood empowerment may be complex, overlapping and fragmented – reflecting patterns of individualistic and associational civil society, rather than being capable of being gathered into any coherent neighbourhood governance framework. Yet there is some consistency in mental maps of neighbourhood, and for good reason.

### An early mental map of neighbourhood

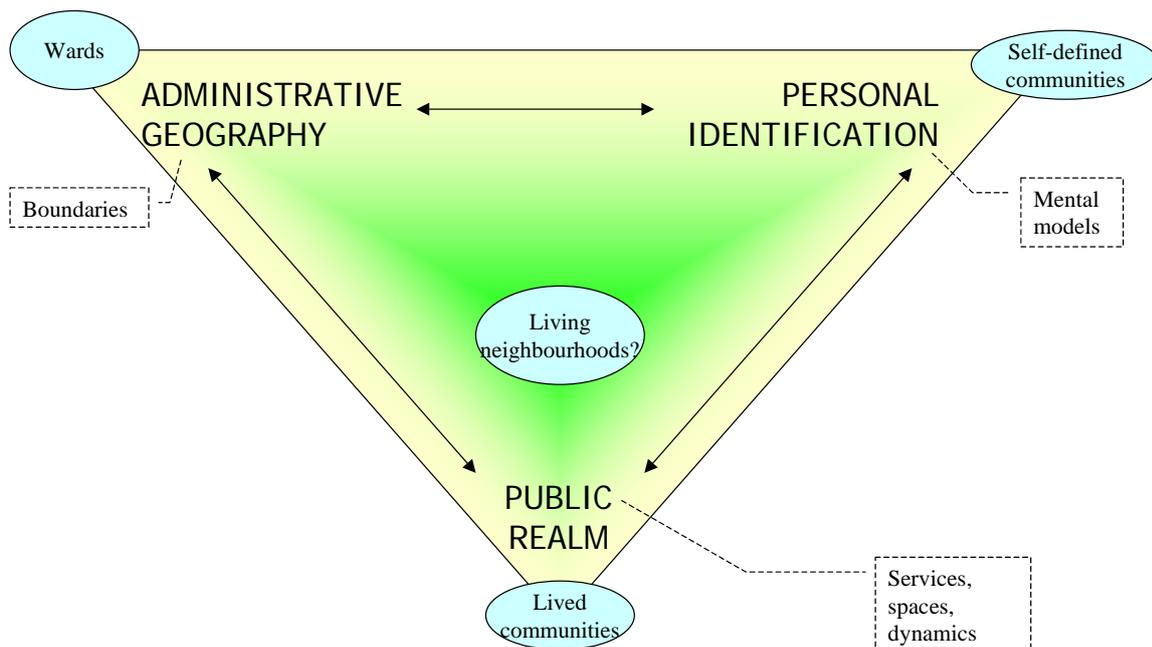


## Neighbourhood and the local public realm

There is no perfect answer to the question of how we should define neighbourhoods. The rose-tinted ideal opposite is realised in few places. But research suggests that some of the elements it emphasises – public spaces, public buildings and public services – offer a third framework for understanding and anchoring neighbourhood: the “local public realm”.

### The American Dream?

“A complete neighbourhood accommodates a variety of building uses and human activity. There are always a number of places to go and things to do within walking distance: an assortment of residential buildings, workplace buildings, commercial buildings (grocery stores, craft shops, boutiques, salons, rental stores, restaurants, taverns, delicatessens, bakeries), and public buildings (i.e. schools, churches, libraries, assembly halls). These components are bound together by a well-crafted public realm. Elements such as tree-lined streets, sidewalks, greens, playgrounds, parks, benches, picnic shelters and gazebos define a neighbourhood’s public spaces and offer valuable community amenities. The unique composition of these components is what characterises each neighbourhood” - *Charrette Centre, a US community-based urban design project*



The diagram above adds this dimension of public experience – playing football in the park, going to the doctor’s or the school gate. Understanding the contribution the local public realm makes to neighbourhood may help us build a bridge between the lenses of administrative geography and personal identifications. For mental maps of neighbourhood are often based around these common landmarks: public buildings, public spaces, public services and community dynamics. The basis on which new parish and town councils can be established today is one of *justified self-definition* – requiring them to demonstrate they serve an identifiable community held together by public facilities.

The local public realm both describes the environments where living neighbourhoods form, and – where that environment is derelict or lacking – has potential as a diagnostic and prescriptive framework. It is not accidental that many policy areas where neighbourhood empowerment and governance are

**The neighbourhood of services**

A recent Future Foundation study on neighbourhoods focused on three places, Sheffield, Thetford in Norfolk and Walton on Thames in Surrey. The research team asked residents to describe their neighbourhood, circle it on a map of their area and then list the characteristics that made it their neighbourhood.

The results showed that facilities and buildings (doctor’s surgery, post office, primary school) are key features of people’s mental model of neighbourhood. The conclusion was that a combination of top-down (geodemographic or ONS) and bottom-up definitions would produce a more complete picture of lived neighbourhood. Such an approach could also help local authorities and other actors to map and address “neighbourhood gaps”.

contemplated – from parks to policing – revolve around improving elements of the local public realm. Its importance is explored in the next chapter below.

## The experience of neighbourliness

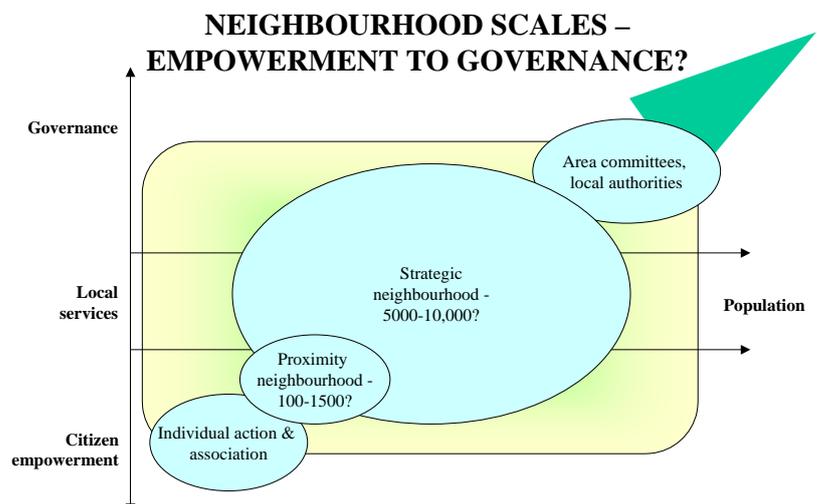
Neighbourliness in the British context has been defined as “friendliness, helpfulness, and respect for privacy”, “maintaining the tension between cooperation and privacy, helpfulness and non-interference, between friendliness and distance”. There is a distinction here from the American emphasis on visiting neighbours’ homes. This British version of neighbourliness suggests that it will rely crucially on the local public realm. Neighbourliness is private interaction that takes place largely in shared public spaces. It is also a stepping-stone to local collective action.

What gives an area its sense of community is the willingness of its members to engage in reciprocity or collective action. People help each other – albeit in limited and low-key ways. Neighbourliness is therefore a valuable indicator for measuring the success, failure or progress of neighbourhood initiatives.

Studies show that deprivation and poverty do not necessarily make a neighbourhood into a “bad” one so long as social cohesion and feelings of “neighbourliness” prevail. Unsatisfactory interactions between local residents and their surroundings (e.g. residents are frustrated by the dereliction of a local park, or out of touch with a local regeneration project) can determine low levels of neighbourliness – or equally, trigger a cohesive neighbourhood response.

## How big are neighbourhoods?

Depending on who we are and our network of relationships, we may define our ‘neighbourhood’ as our street, block, estate, ward, village, postcode, even the surrounding areas. The European Union has used the term for a ring of



neighbouring states stretching for thousands of miles, and astronomers use it to group stars. Neighbourhood is a compelling human metaphor, often used to domesticate the unfamiliar.

Neighbourhoods can and do vary in size. What is more, large and small conceptions of neighbourhoods can be considered as complementary. A number of analysts have suggested a layered understanding of neighbourhood, under which neighbourhoods of several thousand people bring together several smaller areas. These 'proximity neighbourhoods' are streets or estate areas where neighbourliness is personal, people know one another as individuals. This approach is informed by anthropological evidence that a human group finds it hard to coordinate to reach decisions if its population is above a range from 500 to 1500. Neighbourhood management is a function that seems to work well when grounded in smaller-scale neighbourhoods.

But a neighbourhood of 5000-10,000 inhabitants is large enough to include a primary school, park and playground space, a doctor's surgery, library or leisure centre, and a number of shops and offices, as the box opposite indicates. This scale of neighbourhood usually provides a range of services and activities within walking distance of home, and presents common issues that require a more strategic response.

<b>Counting neighbourhood structures</b>		
<b>Structure</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>1 for every...</b>
Electoral wards	10,661	5590 people
GP practices	10,683	5580 people
Post offices	17,846	3340 people
Primary schools	18,069	3300 people
Churches, mosques, synagogues	44,648 584 349	1310 people
Public houses	c.60,000	990 people
Libraries	c.4,500	13240 people
Parish & town councils	c.10,000	N/a
Tenant mgt organisations	250	N/a
Neighbourhood mgt initiatives	189	N/a
<b>Population rounded to nearest 10</b>		

## Overlapping neighbourhood

Residents of a community may find themselves simultaneously located within a network of neighbourhoods of different scales and types. Residents may engage at

one level by participating in a management committee of a block of flats whose freehold they share; local planning issues may bring them to participate in a campaign or consultation bringing together their block of flats and other houses in their street; their street and adjacent streets may belong to a common 'neighbourhood watch' area; the parents they meet at the school gates may draw them into a social network which is even more geographically extensive in scale; wider still may be the catchment area of the church they attend or their leisure centre.

Different mental models of neighbourhood are rooted in a diversity of lived experience. Is there any reason why a housing estate, a policing beat, an electoral ward, a school catchment area, a local faith community, should not each have its own boundaries and dynamics? Should they not be shaped by residents' organisations, beat meetings, school governors, ward councillors, religious and community leaders case by case?

Yet there is value that can be unlocked through a holistic view of a neighbourhood. The mission of "community leadership" presently being explored by local authorities means focusing more on cross-cutting vision, joining up services and democratic accountability. Neighbourhood management and other initiatives show that neighbourhood governance can similarly emerge not only to address specific local challenges, but also to bring the range of ultra-local issues together.

It is worth asking whether precisely bounded and mutually exclusive zones of administrative geography provide the most constructive basis for governing overlapping realities. The New Urbanist ideal of self-contained micro-villages has almost never been realised, and is of questionable merit. If the local public realm is understood as a grounding for neighbourhood, it has more to do with centres and dynamics. A key centre for a neighbourhood such as a local park or school may fall outside its nominal boundaries. In such cases, recourse to control by a higher body is not the only option. There are a number of other possibilities – basing neighbourhoods around centres rather than on borders, neighbourhood decisions to influence or support services outside their nominal boundaries, co-operation between several neighbourhoods, enabling non-residents to be involved in neighbourhood governance.

### **Hypotheses**

It would be inappropriate to impose a single meaning of neighbourhood, but our working definition for neighbourhood governance structures could combine geographic and social characteristics, be drawn together by the local public realm, and permit layering and overlapping where appropriate.

# Where is neighbourhood? The local public realm

“It is clear that public services – local schools, health services, parks and libraries – all serve as part of a shared public realm. These are living democratic spaces where people expect to be treated with ‘equal respect’... the conclusion of this argument rests on empowering people to effect change in the public environment around them.”  
*- Tessa Jowell (2005)*

The “local public realm” is the ensemble of neighbourhood spaces open to people. This concept encompasses several kinds of space, not all simply physical:

- **Local public space** – a network made up of the open spaces used by people, including streets, parks, squares, estate areas
- **Local public services and their civic centres**, including primary schools, community centres, public transport facilities, churches and mosques, doctors’ surgeries, leisure centres
- **“Third” spaces**, including cafes, pubs, and shopping centres
- **The local public sphere** where communication and reflection takes place, including virtual public spaces such as community radio, civic websites and email lists, neighbourhood newsletters or magazines, noticeboards.

Together they provide the frame for our lived experiences of neighbourhood. This is where neighbours meet and gather, and it is where neighbourhood challenges are confronted. Accordingly, if we are to have a well-grounded understanding of neighbourhood empowerment and transformation, we need to understand how each of these elements contributes to the local public realm.

Some neighbourhoods may centre primarily around civic buildings or parks, others around third spaces; some may be characterised by the near-total absence of a local public realm, or blighted by negative centres (e.g. a fortress-like benefits office). The ensemble of the local public realm is not static: enterprise, intervention and collective action can enrich and transform it, healing scars and filling gaps.

The local public realm is also a personal public realm. Rather than thinking of it as purely physical and anonymous, we should aim to understand it as organically connected to local people’s identity and practices, and to the interests they may

share (safety, leisure, cleanliness, sociability, property values, family life, chances for learning and development).

## Local public spaces

Too many British neighbourhoods lack local character. In recent decades the homogenisation of high streets has been echoed in our residential areas and public spaces. The quality and function of the built environment around us can have a significant impact on the way we interact with our surroundings. In many cases people do not 'use' their neighbourhood for social relations because it does not offer anything to do, it is not safe, or 'there is never anyone around'. By creating spaces for interaction in the street or the park, by adding playgrounds and other zones of local activity, and by enabling local particularity, neighbourhood spaces can flourish again.

- **Street scene** - the layout and quality of the street scene can make a great difference to the way people connect. Often perception of streets as unsafe, dirty or jammed with cars can hinder the role of the street as a meaningful social 'container' for neighbourhood relations. Streets of Shame, a CABE/BBC Radio 4 initiative, recently concluded a study on residents perceptions of their streets by observing that the 'worst streets are generally those that are seen as dirty and poorly maintained, dominated by traffic, unsafe, derelict, inaccessible, uncomfortable, and ugly.'
- **Parks and green spaces** - Many of our parks were created in order to provide a public amenity and to improve well being, especially in heavily built-up towns and deprived areas. Despite substantial renewal, many green spaces across the country remain derelict, overgrown and unsafe. If integrated into the neighbourhood th, parks can play a significant role in health, leisure, social cohesion, youth activities and even providing public space for civic activities.
- **Play spaces** - Activities for children and young people are often lacking in parks and neighbourhoods. Boredom is very much a reality in young people's experience of neighbourhood. Play spaces in parks or squares, even street corner playgrounds could help making the neighbourhood a site of interaction for young people, their parents and other residents.

## Local public services and civic centres

Schools, health centres, libraries, community centres, leisure centres, faith organisations, transport stops form a network of neighbourhood facilities where people cross paths and the personal can become public. These centres of the local public realm are key neighbourhood assets and building-blocks of local identity.

It is therefore striking that the connections between them are often weak or non-existent, and that many of them are often substantially closed to the community. Branch libraries are generally open for a fraction of the week, often during the working day. Most schools remain closed to their communities even outside teaching hours, though a range of extended schools initiatives have been putting them to better use for the community. Outside increasingly infrequent and ill-attended times of worship, churches remain largely underused spaces. People often don't even know about the existence or location of key local centres – which, in an era of transient urban populations, is an argument for more public neighbourhood maps.

Schools, in particular primary schools, are key neighbourhood centres. They combine facilities for learning and public assembly, child-rearing, leisure and play. The school gate is the origin of many social networks. Opening them up to become community spaces is a challenge given recent trends toward fortification, but extended schools can lead to considerable benefits and improve intergenerational contact.

## Third spaces

“Third spaces” like cafés and pubs are vital settings for informal public life - they places where people can meet old friends, make new acquaintances, discuss the important issues of the day, and temporarily throw off the weight of the world. Involvement in informal public life has important psychological, social, and political implications not always understood. As a result many newly built estates or regenerated areas lack places to socialise. However, many traditional third spaces are closing down. Between 1995 and 2000, we lost a cumulative 30,000 local economic outlets – a trend that looks set to continue.

In some cases, particularly in rural areas, post offices and pubs are all there is of the local public realm. But these third spaces are not always providing a modern service to modern communities. The publicness of a hairdressers', a DIY shop or a pub depends considerably on its proprietor. The idea of pub as community centre, epitomised in our soap operas' Queen Vic and Rover's Return, is not always realised.

Meanwhile café culture is growing: coffee has replaced tea as the UK's most popular hot drink. But there is a parallel tradition of British "caff culture" which both continues and is evolving. Cafés or pubs can enhance the use of a square or an area, increasing the number of meeting places and the uses of a neighbourhood. Good examples of regenerations see the combination of cafés with parks or home zones.

## Civic media and the local public sphere

The public sphere – the domain of publishing, the media and social argument – creates virtual public spaces by facilitating communication. Its structures enable people to exchange ideas and discover possibilities without necessarily being present in the same place at the same time.

There is a broad consensus that governance benefits when underpinned by a thriving public sphere, in which authority is challenged and wide-ranging feedback can be brought to bear for the general good. In the UK, the quality of local media is very variable and often bad – and it almost never reaches down to neighbourhood level. In conjunction with policies of devolution, social trends suggest that the fostering of innovation in civic and neighbourhood media could create significant public value. Both the BBC and OFCOM are beginning to consider hyperlocal media. Elements of the local public sphere can include:

- Local newsletters or newspapers
- Noticeboards
- Public maps of the neighbourhood, other signs of identity
- Community radio
- Local email discussion or announcement lists
- Community websites
- Weblogs and email lists run by local representatives

### Community radio – new frontiers?

OFCOM has just awarded Forest of Dean Radio the first of a new tranche of full time five-year community radio licenses in the UK. It covers a rural, spread-out and disadvantaged area with a population of some 80,000, helping to connect its isolated communities. More than 5,000 local people have been involved in making programmes as well as local businesses, schools, voluntary groups and councils. It developed through Restricted Service Licenses and an AM pilot, with audience estimated at 20,000.

- Local associations
- The practices of public figures
- Other, innovative structures

### **Hypotheses**

Recognising common resources and challenges will be a key trigger for neighbourhood action. Much activity will focus on renewing this local public realm, while reinforcing its interconnection through multifunctional spaces (schools and green space in particular) and a growing local public sphere.

# Empowering neighbourhoods: Approaches & lessons

Empowering neighbourhoods is not an end in itself. It is worthwhile insofar as it contributes toward transforming neighbourhoods by improving public value outcomes and community trust. Initial evidence suggests that neighbourhood empowerment can be valuable in:

- Enabling local people to take joint ownership of neighbourhood issues, to develop coherent visions and carry them through;
- Helping the community to reshape the delivery of services to better meet local needs, e.g. shifting service priorities and practices or joining up delivery;
- In certain cases, enabling neighbourhood bodies to deliver services directly, either on a delegated or devolved basis;
- Civic participation to help improve the neighbourhood;
- Tapping financial resources for neighbourhood improvements;
- Improving levels of local social capital;
- Improving citizens' sense of legitimacy, trust and their capacity to affect decisions and outcomes.

The public value rationale for neighbourhood empowerment is greatest where an issue is strongly rooted in area, the issue affects the community as a whole, and there is local specificity. Community safety, the quality of public spaces, regeneration and planning all meet these criteria.

What is less often noted is that the *connections between* local issues offer one of the richest seams of local variation and potential. Furthermore, local services which are primarily personal in their character (such as education, social care, health and leisure) often have a collective dimension, and are capable of generating externality benefits to the neighbourhood. This analysis may argue for open and cross-cutting governance models that give people in neighbourhoods the opportunity to help knit the range of local services together. Criteria for judgement are however notably lacking. Can we develop matrices of involvement and efficacy for neighbourhood

governance, adding a practical dimension of public value to the “ladder of participation”?

A very wide range of approaches have been taken to neighbourhood-level empowerment in the past. Much of the practice to date in the UK has centred around public authorities ‘reaching down’ in attempts to engage citizens around specific issues. This top-down approach has often been unavoidable given the scarcity of grassroots democratic structures, and has seen notable successes. Two recent trends can be observed:

- Citizen representatives are playing an increasingly large role in neighbourhood forums, in particular in area-based regeneration.
- Agendas are increasingly being joined up on the ground by both public service professionals and local communities, as they recognise that at neighbourhood level divisions between public space and the environment, community safety, youth and leisure are largely artificial

Here we present an initial review of some of the more specific approaches taken in the past to empowering neighbourhoods, including a handful of lessons learnt. In the course of Transforming Neighbourhoods we are seeking a deeper and broader understanding of the state of knowledge here, in particular about risks and failures, and inviting input.

## Neighbourhood leadership

- **Community champions and advocates:** A wide range of local people play this role from time to time – including ward councillors, neighbourhood representatives, local officials and neighbourhood managers, public figures ranging from faith leaders to shopkeepers, and ordinary citizens. Community champions need to be recognisable, visible and accessible – more formal governance processes help here, but so does doorstep and street contact, making photos and contact details available and providing physical “one-stop shops” where people can come to address a range of issues.
- **Participatory leadership:** By enabling all citizens who attend open meetings to make proposals, engage in deliberation and take decisions on key issues such as taxation, New England town meetings, like other participatory structures, open up leadership to the community at large – at least its activist members.
- **Building capacity for neighbourhood leadership:** Again, this can be developed in a range of ways - through programmes such as Newham’s “influential councillors” programme, by giving local public officials like wardens and housing officers a role in advocacy, by encouraging the development of local associations and community enterprises, and by involving people in participation. Civic education to widen the circle of participants – now numbered in tens of thousands - is a key part of Porto Alegre’s participatory budgeting.
- **Local campaigns:** Community campaigning is seldom encouraged by public authorities, for fear they may become its target. But very often, local activism provoked by threats or obstacles is a seedbed for more wide-ranging processes of neighbourhood empowerment. The origins of Balsall Heath’s civic renaissance can be traced substantially to a campaign against local prostitution in the early 1990s involving more than 500 people standing on street corners every night. Most new town or parish councils are set up thanks to petition campaigns. Services like BBC iCAN or the handbook produced by New Politics Network can help local campaigns develop.
- **Neighbourhood planning and visioning:** A wide range of approaches have been used to enable residents to reflect on where their neighbourhood is now, where they want to be, and how they could get there. Where capacity exists, short term action planning and joint tasking is very effective. Processes like participatory planning in Kerala, the family of “Planning for Real” techniques (annotating a neighbourhood map with ideas and priorities), parish appraisals, community visioning from Oregon, and the “Imagine Chicago” approach extend well beyond land-use frameworks, helping to develop coherent, locally-owned visions for change. Careful design is necessary to balance realism with vision. Such processes can produce conflicts with larger-scale plans or ignore strategic necessities.
- **Evidence-based leadership:** Making neighbourhood data more easily available to citizens helps gather consensus on priorities and ensure action is targeted effectively: ChicagoCrime.org maps crime data down to street level.
- **Trust in leadership,** in neighbourhoods as elsewhere, depends on empowerment, communication, transparent processes and good results.

## Engagement in neighbourhoods

- **Street representatives:** Where they can feed into broader neighbourhood forums and leadership, street representatives can play an important role in facilitating two-way communication between residents and public authorities.
- **DIY citizen's juries:** There is a considerable body of experience in the US around citizens' juries and in central Europe around "planning cells". Generally agendas for such processes are set by a public authority. But DIY experiments in Blackburn and Newcastle enable local people to choose their own issues, bringing the process back toward its antecedent eighteenth-century "people's courts", though with modern selection procedures. This appears to have created a greater sense of ownership and follow-up action by jurors. The organisers have prepared a comic-book DIY guide. Juries are often consultative only, but in British Columbia the recent Citizens' Assembly on constitutional reform was given the power of initiative.
- **Bell-ringing for street talk:** after a gun crime crisis, police were seeking a new way to engage with the local community in Aston. They teamed up with the local Neighbourhood Forum and its chair, a well-known local church minister. They visit streets together and ring a large school bell to alert residents to their presence, inviting them to come and discuss local issues. This "street talk" provides vital intelligence and a sense of issues and priorities for public authorities, including the council. Simply ringing the bell, reminiscent of the sound of the ice-cream van, turns each street briefly into a space for public dialogue. The scheme is being rolled out more widely in Aston.
- **Neighbourhood parties:** Carnivals, festivals, fairs, street parties and other community events provide a focus for social cohesion and can be used as an informal entry point to neighbourhood governance, for instance through surveys, . Shoreditch NDC has put the planning of its festival entirely in the hands of local children and young people.
- **Electronic forums:** The "I-Neighbor" project at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology rolled out in 2004 and already claims to cover 3900 neighbourhoods. It provides a free generic service, based around web tools and email lists, for local communities in the US and Canada to identify and self-organise. A two-year research project showed the tools provided helped neighbours form new social ties, and resulted in higher levels of community participation. Facilities include a local directory, shared photo album, polls and carpool. Discussions range from engagement with local elected officials to organising neighbourhood parties and meetings, or babysitting. A simpler framework is the Local Issues Forum (a hybrid email list and web forum) pioneered in Minnesota and now being trialled in several UK areas. Critical mass and a culture of respect are key to successful local email lists, and Local Issues comes with a body of knowledge about how to make the e-list hum. A web dimension helps prevent forums from becoming closed shops.
- **Youth engagement:** In recent decades youth services moved away from area-based work engaging groups and young people in general toward casework and targeting delinquent individuals. But in crises, community safety partnerships have returned to detached youth work, sport, public facilities and youth councils to help them turn the corner, to great effect. The time may be coming for a wider resurgence of informal youth engagement at

street and neighbourhood level, with local youth services often led by young people themselves. More formal youth councils or forums and restorative programmes like Youth Offender Panels are also part of the repertoire.

- **Community football leagues:** football teams and a youth league were set up in Skelmersdale, Lancashire. Young people were told that if they got in trouble with the police, points would be docked from their team. Anti-social behaviour fell over the summer: peer pressure for good behaviour had been mobilised.
- **Neighbourhood democracy, volunteering and co-production:** Where they operate well, voluntary action and more formal frameworks of representative and participatory democracy (discussed below) also focus engagement in neighbourhoods.

## Enriching the local public realm

- **Local design and care of green spaces:** Involvement in creating or renovating a local public space and ongoing vigilance and care help reinforce local networks. After a rapid decline of their parks, Oldham Council gave priority to community involvement. In Stoneleigh Park, with the help of the Civic Trust's Green Flag initiative, a Friends Group was set up in 1998 and helped with local consultation on refurbishment and management. The park has been transformed. Events and community activities are regular. Decisions about facilities – floodlit multi-games courts, youth shelters, sports pitches, bowling green and planting – were based on meetings with the Friends Group. Stoneleigh has a trim trail paid for by a Healthy Living Initiative that organises sports in the park.
- **Appropriate scale:** In a classic error, all 218,000 people of Bexley in Kent were asked what they thought of the council's entire Parks Strategy. 1 in 200 responded.
- **Common space, community strategy:** In 2000 developers handed over "The Green" (a former landfill site adjacent to the community centre) to Colden Common Parish Council. Hampshire County Council gave the primary school a wide strip of land on the other side of the road. After a school fire, this land had been used for temporary classrooms, then neglected. The parish and school agreed to redevelop the areas together "to bring to the centre of our village a feeling of community". Residents, including parish councillors, local young people and association members, developed ideas for informal space for teenage recreation. A "kick-about area" and a skate park were established along with a mini-amphitheatre for performances and a rural craft area, and local people got involved in planting. A toddler play area and "outside classroom" are planned.
- **Neighbourhood wardens and guardians:** Neighbourhood wardens employed by community bodies or local authorities provide a visible presence in neighbourhoods, walking the streets, deterring crime and anti-social behaviour, tackling environmental problems and helping residents with their complaints. In Southwark, 100 local residents volunteer as "Street Leaders" reporting environmental crimes, including dog mess and flytipping. In Leicestershire every police officer is made "guardian" of an estate, shopping area or village, which they cannot always be present in but are continually returning to. Quality of life in these "micro-beats" is increasingly used to affect promotion and bonuses. Park rangers, gardeners and play supervisors also act as guardians of public spaces.
- **Activist gentrification:** Newington Green, a green space cut off by multiple lanes of traffic and hidden behind high bushes, had become a neighbourhood "black hole" and centre for anti-social behaviour. At the initiative of the Newington Green Action Group, it was re-landscaped with a children's playground and streetlamps, pavements were widened and neighbourhood policing was introduced. Local retail, property prices and use of the Green rocketed. At a 200-strong meeting at the local chapel, the president of RIBA called it a prime example of people power and pride of place. According to one resident's account, there was some dissatisfaction about the self-appointed Action Group, in particular about failures to involve the Turkish community. Regeneration inevitably creates winners and losers, and could benefit from more formal structures of leadership

and accountability.

- **Junior neighbourhood wardens:** in Rochdale, the Bowlee Park Housing Association involved 170 9-11 year-old children as “eyes and ears” for its neighbourhood wardens team (which itself includes young people), to spot vandalism, graffiti and repairs needed, and to get involved with their families in community environmental projects.
- **Staging neighbourliness:** In Hackney, copies of a Good Neighbour Declaration were distributed to every household on targeted estates. Residents who signed up were then given a certificate and a window or door sticker proclaiming “I have signed the Good Neighbour declaration of the South Hackney estates”.
- **DIY civic media:** Wirksworth.net, serving a small town near Derby, is a vibrant and characterful example of a DIY community website. It grew out of a local campaign for broadband access, and is linked to New Opportunities for Wirksworth, a regeneration organisation whose executive includes the town council mayor and the local vicar. It features pictures of local characters, discussion about a new cheese shop, news about the federation of two local primary schools, local groups, a community diary and stories.

## Community safety and public order

- **Chicago's Alternative Policing Strategy:** The recent UK neighbourhood policing drive draws substantially on experience in Chicago and elsewhere in the US. An international benchmark for community involvement in policing, CAPS allocated officer teams to beats and enabled citizen input through informal "beat meetings" held on a regular basis in prominent neighbourhood locations. Community specialists and associations were relied on to get people to show up. Residents would identify a list of local problems, but police dominated the solution side of the equation, frequently sticking to traditional enforcement-oriented approaches. It was not easy to maintain citizen attendance at beat meetings, even with the aid of neighbourhood activists and organisations. While residents in four of five districts of the initial Chicago trial reported significant improvements in police responsiveness to their concerns, and physical dereliction also declined, the informal community dimension proved challenging to maintain.
- **Public figures for public order:** In Cardiff, the Community Safety Partnership aims to have recruited 200-400 visible public servants and authority figures within two years to support local police – including park rangers, bus inspectors and city centre security staff. A "Drivers' Watch" scheme in the West Midlands involves cabbies, milkmen and driving instructors in monitoring the street scene.
- **Community support officers:** Increasing use is being made of community support officers (CSOs), as well as neighbourhood wardens and 12,100 special constables. CSOs engage with the community and deal with local dereliction, and can issue fixed penalty notices for anti-social behaviour. Almost 1,900 of the 5,000 CSOs in early 2005 were funded by local partners. Resistance from mainstream police bodies to such diversification is not unknown, but success tells its own story. The physical basing of police in neighbourhoods or schools suffering from serious disorder can help improve the situation.
- **Anti-social behaviour orders and fixed penalty notices:** beginning in 2003, police officers gained the power to issue penalty notices to people aged 18 or over whom they suspect of having committed a public order offence, with secondary recourse to the courts. ASBOs are also used to deter anti-social behaviour and maintain public order. Local authorities and Registered Social Landlords can apply for orders, and neighbourhood bodies may be given this power. The most common behaviour targeted by ASBOs are verbal abuse, harassment, assault, graffiti, and excessive noise. If made available to certain neighbourhood bodies, they could be given more positive scope.
- **Curfews:** According to major recent studies in California and the UK, curfews fail to reduce crime and their main impact is on law-abiding young people.
- **Mediation and rules:** in a Turin estate, a community mediation process was begun to address conflicts in the use of public space. Over time this led to the community formulating a code of behaviour in public space.
- **Neighbourhood Watch:** over 160,000 neighbourhood watch schemes in the UK covering over 6 million homes make this possibly the biggest voluntary network in the

country. It has flourished most in areas of relative affluence, with relatively low crime rates but a sense of vulnerability. NW helps to forge links, and to reduce fears. In well-organised areas, evidence has shown it to be effective in particular in stopping burglary. After initial vitality, attrition is often high: groups depend on individual coordinators (generally male, retired, middle-class), and other residents' involvement is generally low. The primary aim has been protection of private property. Core activities include informal surveillance, property-marking and home security improvements, extending to social events and street cleaning. Recent innovations have included "park watches" focusing not just on private property but on public spaces. The Post Office recently sponsored National Neighbourhood Watch. In one Gloucestershire village the parish council, disillusioned with the local police, has established "Bromsberrow Watch", a 26-citizen uniformed rapid response team. NW relationship with authorities is informal and integrated community policing appears more effective, in particular in high-crime areas. However, given the size of the network, it could be considered as a conduit for further innovation and empowerment.

## Local public services – reshaping, co-producing, devolving

- **Neighbourhood management:** One of the main goals of the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders is to reshape local public services, encouraging them to exploit synergies and respond to local needs. This has been achieved partly through service level agreements – in particular with the police, PCTs and environmental services. Accompanying seed funding and flexibilities have triggered a wave of innovations, including neighbourhood policing and extended schools. Hastings's "full-service" schools include citizens' advice, childcare, counselling, study support, social and community workers, mentoring, sports & arts activities. Such innovations are often then rolled out to a wider area, funded within mainstream budgets. A neighbourhood focus and strong leadership can play a role in tailoring services to local challenges and opportunities, and in catalysing broader change.
- **Service level agreements:** SLAs between local democratic bodies and other public authorities have been used to some effect. By establishing a baseline expectation of service, they can help neighbourhoods take ownership and hold service providers accountable. They also enable neighbourhoods to identify where their own funding can be targeted for genuine additional benefit.
- **Community service agreements:** CSAs, a model proposed by the Scarman Trust, are reciprocal SLAs between communities and service providers establishing a framework for co-production. For instance, a community commitment to clear up a dumping ground could be made in exchange for greater neighbourhood policing.
- **Pooling resources, co-location and service integration:** One example of co-location is the March Library and Learning Centre, a partnership with the district council, local education services, careers services and others, opened in 2000 in a Cambridgeshire market town of 20,000 people. It receives 500 visits a day from a cross-section of the community, and 900 people registered for learning courses in the first six months. In an increasing number of neighbourhoods and estates, local teams and

partnerships are bringing together autonomous or seconded staff from a range of local public services. Synergies are being discovered between services such as health and leisure, education, childcare and lifelong learning.

- **Valuing external neighbourhood benefits:** there is not a great deal of evidence to suggest that extended schools – for instance – significantly improve pupils' academic performance. But where they have a significant effect on neighbourhood social capital and the quality of other local services, they are worth valuing and resourcing. Where they are linked to employment, health or lifelong learning programmes, they can also improve pupils' life chances.
- **Devolved services:** there is a rich emerging variety of services being devolved below authority level, including tenant management organisations, leisure and youth services, even street cleaning. It is desirable where local knowledge and particularities are important, where there are opportunities for volunteering and co-production, and where effectiveness can be improved. Where a service has a long value chain, just the frontline elements can sometimes be devolved to great benefit.

## Neighbourhood investment & spending

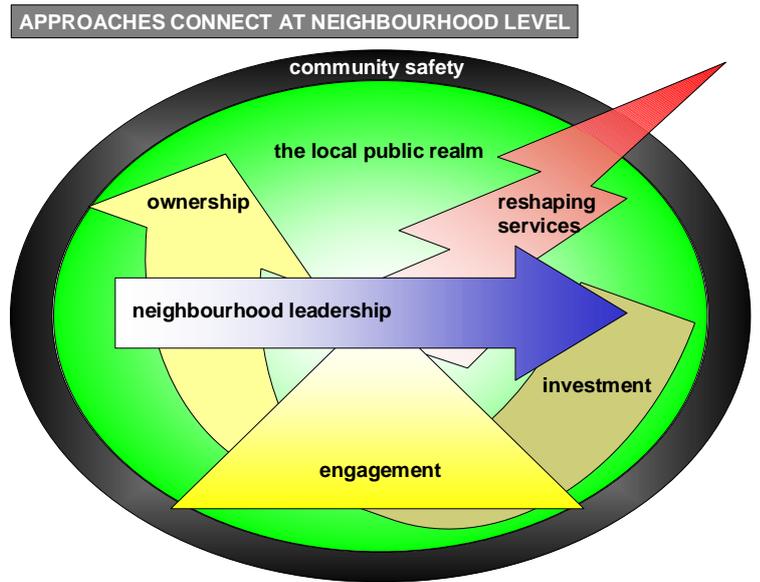
- **Participatory budgeting:** this model pioneered in Brazil's Porto Alegre has spread to almost a hundred cities around the world. A shadow pilot is taking place in Salford at present with the support of Oxfam UK. Participatory budgeting involves neighbourhood assemblies (partly structured around long-standing or spontaneous associations) setting priorities for particular areas of investment spending and electing delegates. The delegates then assemble at higher district and city-wide levels to discriminate between priorities, with support and input from the executive. This is a precisely articulated co-governance structure which, when it works, improves outcomes and civic participation dramatically (in particular for the poor). It may have succeeded too well in Porto Alegre – the goalposts of expectation shifted, and the Workers' Party administration lost power.
- **Precepts and local taxes:** can provide a permanent democratic framework for raising money for local services or investment in facilities. Presently parishes can decide precepts, limited to £5 per elector for general (non-concurrent) purposes, which may be worth reviewing. Communities in Scandinavia and the US regularly vote on the level of local taxes. (It is worth noting that the term "precept" – as distinguished from ordinary local taxation – suggests something "extra" and may militate against public support.)
- **Neighbourhood improvement districts:** A mechanism for democratic decisions on investment where responsible neighbourhood bodies are absent: a levy for specific improvements (e.g. renewing a public space, funding extra CSOs or CCTV) proposed by petition and validated by ballot, administered by local authority.
- **Mainstream budgets:** The reshaping of mainstream spending toward local need is one of the key opportunities at neighbourhood level. Local area agreements represent a further step toward local freedoms and flexibilities, and contain possibilities for a strategic authority to involve its neighbourhoods intimately in setting priorities and deciding on investments. Problems have been encountered in the past in devolving too many budgets to neighbourhood level – in the Tower Hamlets devolution, social care in particular lost capacity and value – but Doncaster is presently preparing to take social care down to neighbourhood level. More modern, flexible and personalised systems may have changed the dynamics.
- **New Deal for Communities:** One of the lessons being learnt from this programme is that putting millions in the hands of a community without sufficient capacity can be a recipe for mismanagement, schism or professional capture. Experience suggests that direct responsibility for much smaller budgets is more appropriate at the neighbourhood level, except where substantial capacity has developed over time, for instance in cases of strong development trusts or Best Value/Quality Parishes.
- **Small budgets** are currently spent in local areas in a range of ways, by parishes, area committees or community forums.

## Community ownership

- **Community enterprises:** for example, development trusts working on regeneration or credit unions. The St Paul's Community Project in Birmingham runs a charitable secondary school, nursery centre, farm enterprise and community centre. A variety of legal entities exist, including companies limited by guarantee, industrial and provident societies for community benefit, and the new community interest companies.
- **Community centres:** It can often take relatively little funding to convert an underused shop, flat or building into a community centre – but ongoing management capacity and revenue prospects are important for sustainability. One of the more eye-catching cases is the "Pub is the Hub" scheme supported by both Prince Charles and the Campaign for Real Ale, which helps people buy their local pub, improve its sustainability and add post office, shop or internet services. Pubs have been bought by consortiums of local people and even by the Parish Council.
- **Community land trusts:** CLTs, democratically owned by local residents, separate out the value of land from property and have been widespread in the US for three decades. Stonesfield Community Trust in West Oxfordshire began with a quarter-acre agricultural site donated for affordable housing for local people and a seedcorn grant of £3000. More homes and workspace have since been built, as well as a low-rent site for the village post office. Net income from affordable rents now funds a local youth service and is projected to rise to £40,000 per year. An even more ambitious project is underway at High Bickington, Devon, and Scottish crofters have also been pioneers. Since 2003 in Scotland, communities have a pre-emptive right to purchase land if it would be in the public interest, and can access support to establish such trusts. "Planning gain" from developers is another route to secure land.
- **Housing co-operatives and associations:** covering 1.8 million households in the UK, these not-for profit structures provide affordable housing and (like other tenant management organisations) have branched out into a wider range of community activities.
- **A sense of public ownership:** legal title is not the only way to secure a sense of neighbourhood ownership. Involving people in deciding designs and in the ongoing guardianship of a public space or asset can be less onerous and nearly as effective. Exclusive ownership claims laid to public spaces by private interest groups are undesirable, and the closure of estate alleyways "privatised" by gangs is proven to be effective in improving safety. But local public ownership, while similarly personal, is based on welcoming and guardianship rather than exclusion.

**Hypothesis**

No general answer yet leaps out as to where governance should be service-specific and where a more holistic approach reaps dividends. *But* evidence from practice suggests that neighbourhood challenges often connect (e.g. around public space and community safety), and can benefit from being addressed together. Neighbourhood empowerment needs to be understood ecologically. Engagement, leadership, investment in capacity and the local public realm, a sense of ownership, the maintenance of public order and the creation of responsive services feed into each other over time.



# Joining up in neighbourhoods:

## Governance models

Our review of processes for neighbourhood empowerment today in the UK has showed them to be broad but fragmentary. Many are service-specific or issue-specific. It often makes sense to begin with simple and immediate challenges with which people can engage to shape their future. But even here, some of the best practice has involved looking beyond artificial boundaries and connecting up agendas and resources on the ground. Lessons emerging from the neighbourhood management pathfinders suggest that there is considerable potential in taking a holistic, bottom-up approach to the challenges and opportunities faced in neighbourhoods (see box), which can pay dividends in terms of both public value outcomes and levels of community trust and engagement.

The challenge of joining up in neighbourhoods and reshaping mainstream services together to meet local needs is a key challenge of public management. But change processes acquire leverage not just from better outcomes, but through democracy and local ownership.

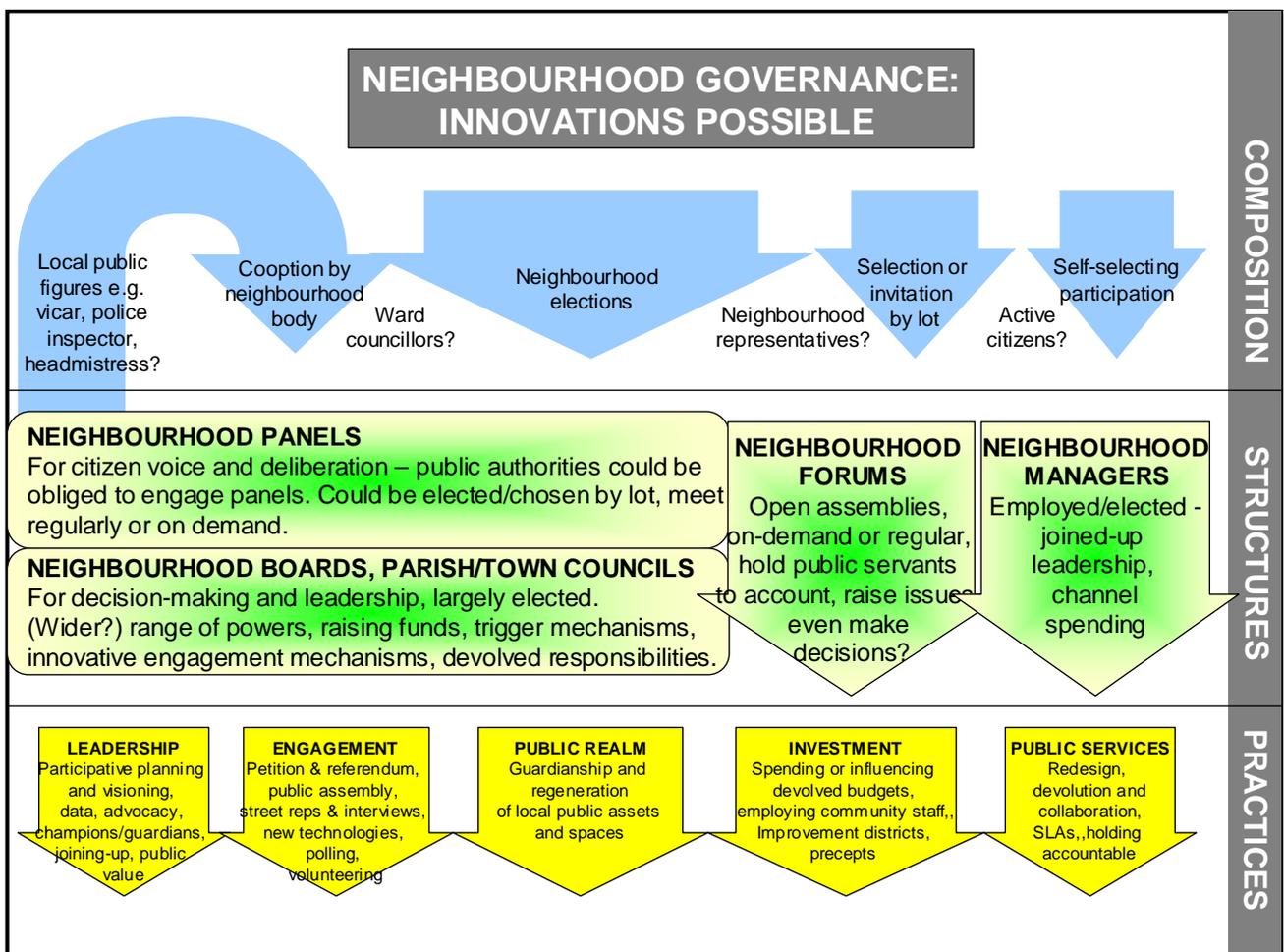
A variety of neighbourhood governance structures are possible, and frameworks should grow out of local specificities: history, capacity, and the nature of the challenges faced. There is no question of multi-purpose neighbourhood bodies simply

### Neighbourhood management in Hastings

Greater Hollington in Hastings, with 10,600 people, was one of the first neighbourhood management pathfinders. It faced anti-social behaviour and disorder, especially among young people, poor transport links leading to isolation, and poorly-maintained play areas and open spaces. The neighbourhood management partnership trained local residents to do street interviews; established a network of 155 "street representatives" responsible for promoting a 'good neighbourhood' ethos, delivering leaflets and feeding views back; held regular public meetings and consultations, and delivered a magazine to every house in the area, with 55% of recipients responding to featured initiatives (such as micro-assistance to help people reclaim derelict allotments). It rapidly achieved 70% awareness. Mainstream service providers were not swift to respond, but several established local teams, and service level agreements were set up with the police and the PCT. The partnership funded a neighbourhood police team whose success led to wider roll-out, and an "enviro-crime" team of community wardens and local authority environmental health officers. A "Full Service" Schools Initiative was piloted, in which three local primary schools and one secondary school joined with outside agencies to provide a wide range of services. Like neighbourhood policing and neighbourhood management, this approach has now been rolled out elsewhere.

replacing the ecology of local association, consultation, co-production and co-governance that may already be present, from tenant management organisations and social enterprises to community policing. Rather, they could help in gathering these processes together, filling gaps and providing broader local vision, leadership and accountability (increasingly important in cases of decision-making, service devolution or community assets).

The diagram overleaf, intended only as an indicative starting-point and based as much on past practice as on fresh thinking, presents some possibilities for the future composition, structures and practices of neighbourhood governance. In every case approaches should be determined with local people and guided by the outcomes sought.



The structures sketched above range from occasional open public meetings to permanent elected neighbourhood boards. Neighbourhood arrangements should interface constructively with the parallel devolution processes of larger public authorities. While the opportunity for empowerment may be extended to every neighbourhood, not everyone will want to take it up in the same way – or even at all. The relationship between different democratic modes of participation and representation and the involvement of local public figures may rightly differ from case to case.

Governance structures are often today constituted on a “neo-corporatist” model, with formulae bringing together a range of public authorities and stakeholders. In the French town of Lille, ward-level “community councils” bring together town councillors, elected neighbourhood representatives and delegates from local associations. Rather than having structures imposed on them from the centre, neighbourhood representatives could agree to co-opt other local public figures (e.g. officials or community leaders) on the basis of their function.

It is worth considering whether selection by lot could in future play a greater part in neighbourhood governance arrangements, in particular for more reflective and less executive functions. There is evidence that citizens view this mechanism as being *at least* as legitimate as local election. This could help to involve a more diverse group of local people, and at less cost.

An element of participative decision-making or a “right of initiative” could even be made available to open neighbourhood forums that meet certain standards, as with the New England town meetings (where citizens often decide directly on significant public issues, even tax rates) and participatory

### **Urban parish (neighbourhood board) in Milton Keynes**

Woughton Parish Council is a deprived area of Milton Keynes with a population of about 10,000. Its budget of £384K (to Jan 2004) was funded by a council tax of £59.78 for band D. Milton Keynes provides administrative support and is devolving services to parishes. It has made a significant contribution to improving the lives of residents by, among other things:

- Organising and motivating a group of volunteers from the community to undertake a “deep cleanse” of housing estate areas, i.e. collecting rubbish, abandoned goods, removing graffiti
- Employing youth workers, a crime & safety officer and a “parish ranger” who responds to local environmental concerns
- Employing a CSO not only to patrol the street but to act as a “community advocate” chasing up the local authority about residents’ concerns
- Converting a derelict pub into a community centre
- Providing new play areas

budgeting and planning processes elsewhere in the world. There is already a parish right of petition which could be built upon. In several places in the UK, open forums elect panels who play an ongoing role in scrutiny or governance.

In cases (perhaps relatively few) where a wider range of powers and a stronger structure of legitimacy and accountability is desired, citizens can establish new parish or town councils. They can presently do this by gathering a petition signed by 10% of local residents or 250 people (whichever is larger).

Existing practice, under which 1% of parish councillors come from ethnic minorities, over half are over 60 and many candidates stand unopposed, could bear improvement. If these structures are to be significantly modernised or to take on new powers, legislation may be required (it certainly is to extend the opportunity to establish them to Londoners). The "Quality Parishes" scheme provides an existing accreditation framework for parishes wishing to take on greater responsibility, such as devolved services. Is the parish clerk really the core employee of a modern neighbourhood council? Can the model be made more flexible? Could tenant management organisations or community trusts evolve to the same point?

Where there is no neighbourhood body extant, public authorities could support one-time "neighbourhood enquiries" on receipt of a petition signed by a significant number of local people. Such enquiries could operate like citizens' juries to address neighbourhood challenges, take evidence and recommend action. They could be used either as an episodic substitute for permanent neighbourhood governance, or to enable citizens to consider whether they need ongoing structures.

While governance analyses often focus most on composition and structures, it is the practices employed by neighbourhood bodies that will make most difference to their effectiveness. Greater use could be made of local petition or initiative-and-referendum processes to put decision-making power in the hands of the wider community, especially given the increasing ubiquity of mobile phones. The conversational democracy of face-to-face engagement, on the doorstep, in the street and other public spaces remains crucial, and could be multiplied by giving more consideration to the role of civic media and the local public sphere. There is scope for considerable innovation beyond the classic "committee/public meeting" structure.

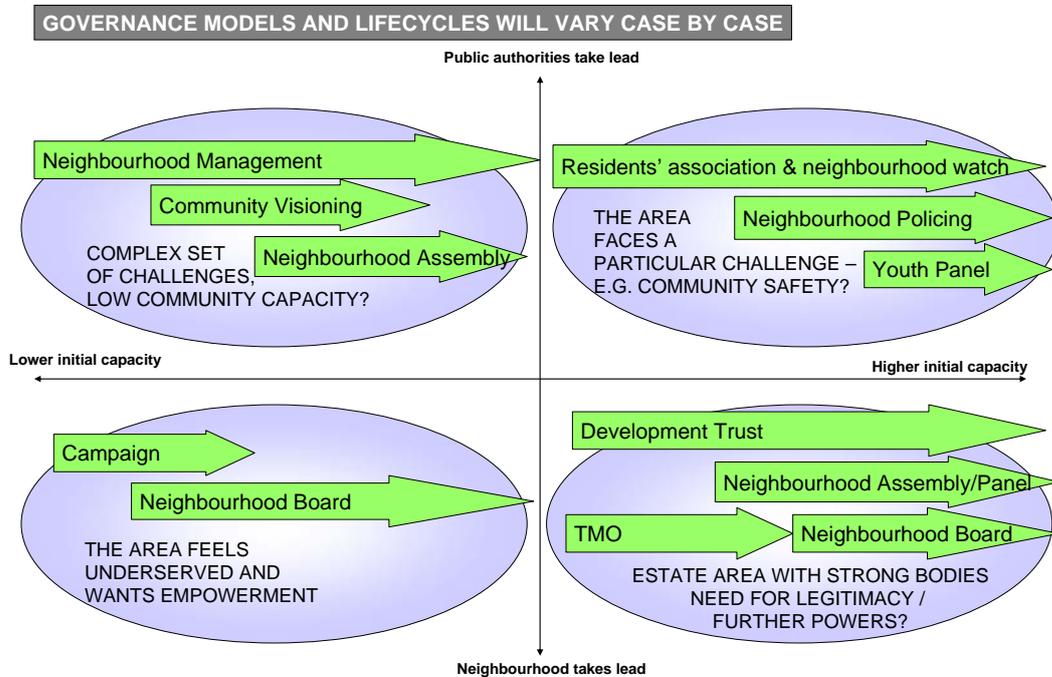
Given substantial experience of competition and conflict between neighbourhoods, it is important to consider how governance structures can encourage more co-operative behaviour. A shift toward 'own resources' and away from bidding dynamics

would be one way. Another approach is the Porto Alegre participatory budgeting process, which brings neighbourhood priorities and representatives into the city-wide planning process, giving them collective responsibility for a larger common good. More locally, neighbourhoods that border one another could be encouraged to co-operate around shared public spaces or services.

We should consider the relationship between neighbourhood bodies and larger public authorities, and how this can be made more complementary than conflictual. What support can and should local authorities give to neighbourhoods, and how can this help them achieve their goals? To what extent can neighbourhood charters be written in general terms, or should they be put together from the bottom up? It will be important to review the possibilities and risks of more financial powers devolved to neighbourhood level in the context of the broader Balance of Funding review. What happens when service delivery goes wrong – at neighbourhood level, or indeed at strategic level?

## Neighbourhood governance paths and lifecycles

The diagram below illustrates how different circumstances and challenges may lead to different responses: one size will never fit all.



We need to develop a better understanding of how to manage peaks and troughs of neighbourhood governance. The need for empowerment arises in response to challenges. At the hyper-local level, these may be episodic or require very different institutional responses. The achievement of a goal can mean a nosedive in levels of participation. The paths along which neighbourhoods develop and the way structures die or make way for one another are just as important as governance structures. How are neighbourhood structures merged, made dormant or closed down? Under what circumstances should powers be taken back by a higher level?

## Identifying problems and minimising risks

A wide range of problems are sometimes associated with neighbourhood empowerment:

- Lack of economies of scale
- Reinventing the wheel
- Lack of specialist skills and capacity
- Capture by interests and failure to represent all parts of the community
- Conflict with neighbouring areas and other public authorities
- Issues around double-taxation & additionality
- Corruption, lack of accountability and transparency
- Fragmentation of services, lack of strategic context, lack of data
- Lack of scrutiny or accountability

In the course of the programme, we will assess these with a view to minimising risks and maximising opportunities. Particular attention will need to be given to how governance structures minimise or exacerbate conflicts based in social, ethnic, interest-based or identity struggles, and how to build consensus and “bridging capital”.

### **Hypotheses**

The focus should be on empowering people to transform their neighbourhoods, not on paper agreements. They need a general framework within which they have the power to adopt appropriate structures, innovation and reform to expand the repertoires available to them, and conversations and stories through which they can find information and inspiration. Different neighbourhoods will need different governance structures – but what they *do* will be most important.

## About the Young Foundation

The Young Foundation brings together insight, innovation and entrepreneurship to meet social needs. We have a 55 year track record of success with ventures such as the Open University, Which?, the School for Social Entrepreneurs and Healthline (the precursor of NHS Direct). We work across the UK and internationally – carrying out research, influencing policy, creating new organisations and supporting others to do the same, often with imaginative uses of new technology. We now have over 60 staff, working on over 40 ventures at any one time, with staff in New York and Paris as well as London and Birmingham in the UK.

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