

**TOOLS AND PROCESSES FOR
NEIGHBOURHOOD PROBLEM-SOLVING?**

**The place for charters, inquiries and community initiatives
in new neighbourhood arrangements**

As the agenda for future reforms of English governance at local and neighbourhood level develops, discussions have been underway in policy circles about two related issues:

- 1 The introduction of “triggers” or “community calls for action”, and
- 2 More widespread use of contracts or charters to set out agreed standards of neighbourhood service provision or local priorities.

This discussion paper reviews their purpose, process and language, and suggests how they could be better situated within a broad repertoire of practical tools for neighbourhood problem-solving. It takes forward ideas of neighbourhood charters and agreements, next-generation scrutiny and inquiries, to clarify a wider framework of neighbourhood tools within which calls for action should be situated. It also outlines complementary petition-based paths for community initiatives. The analysis here of how such processes could contribute to empowering people in neighbourhoods is intended to complement *Seeing the Wood for the Trees*, a previous Young Foundation paper on the future of neighbourhood structures.

Assessing the Community Safety “Call to Action”

Ministers have made a number of public statements proposing rights that empower local people to contest, shape or even take over an unspecified range of local public services. This agenda is manifest in a number of strands of government policy, but policy design in this area is probably most developed around the community safety “call for action” prepared for the current Police and Justice Bill.

The Home Office’s proposals outline a procedure where a crime and disorder issue can be taken by a person resident or working in the area to a ward councillor if it has not been satisfactorily addressed through ordinary complaints procedures. It will be incumbent on the councillor to use his or her judgement to determine the legitimacy of the complaint, to consult and investigate, and as a last resort, to refer the issue to the relevant scrutiny committee (potentially involving a member of the police authority) to review. If it is not thus referred, the person initiating the complaint can escalate the issue to the council executive for referral to the committee. There remains no requirement for the action recommended by the committee to be followed, but responses to triggers would be considered as part of any performance assessment.

This process could provide a new tool to strengthen the capabilities of ward councillors to advocate for their communities and influence local services, which appears broadly desirable. A number of concerns have however been raised about its design if it is intended to be practical enough to bring results and to improve trust in the system. In particular, the extent to which a person needs to have tried ordinary avenues of complaint or to provide evidence is not yet clear. The process outlined furthermore threatens to be slow and cumbersome, and does not take account of issues around support, capacity and collaborative problem-solving frameworks at both neighbourhood and scrutiny level. Under current conditions, making ward councillors sole owners of such a process could risk constraining its effectiveness or throwing large numbers of individual grievances of questionable

merit up to the executive. While conferring a right on individuals, it provides little incentive for more collective action. Therefore, although the process has merits, it is not yet clear how this narrowly-defined community safety call for action could help people to solve the wider range of problems they face in their neighbourhoods, or how it might relate to the challenge of helping citizens take more initiative in solving local problems.

Re-situating calls for action in the new landscape of neighbourhood arrangements

To date, much of the discussion about “triggers” has centred on process design. Some of the key questions have been: *How can neighbourhoods access information about a service provider’s performance? Who can call for action? What form might that action take? What can be done to ensure that councils and service providers respond to calls for action when they are well-founded?*

These questions are vital. But they also point toward reasons for stepping back for a moment from the design of any one specific process, and to consider instead how community calls for action could sit in the overall context of new neighbourhood arrangements.

1. First, this community call for action is a mechanism of last resort for people to force an issue about service standards onto the public agenda when other complaints procedures have been exhausted. Arguably, it is in the public interest to have a safety net in place for when other systems fail; however, a call for action should be *linked to the processes and structures that precede and surround it*, rather than taking place in isolation from wider neighbourhood arrangements and opportunities to engage neighbourhoods in new forms of problem-solving – for instance, through joint action planning or a future reshaping of scrutiny.

2. A call for action could be seen as a blunt instrument to drive responsiveness, which may be necessary when other systems fail. However, our larger aim should be *to encourage a general culture of accountability and responsiveness, built on partnership between service providers and people in neighbourhoods*. A call for action could be a mechanism of last resort in a problem-solving portfolio, but should be developed in tandem with more collaborative measures in order to provide the right incentives to encourage partnership working. Its existence can then provide a background incentive for services to behave responsively in the first instance.

3. Third, neighbourhoods must contend with a variety of problems that vary in their visibility and complexity: from environmental issues such as abandoned cars, to more complex problems concerning dissatisfaction with performance standards or the strategic approach taken by a local authority or public body. Relatively small problems, such as removing abandoned cars or the “fridge in the hedge”, require a rapid response because they can swiftly develop into larger and more persistent issues. Not all problems require elevation to principal authority scrutiny as the response to a call for action; some might be better addressed by supporting representatives to take direct action to solve them, or empowering neighbourhoods (those that want, or are able) to develop their own plans and solutions. In its current form, the community safety call for action offers one course of action for resolving persistent problems in neighbourhoods (by referring valid complaints to principal authority scrutiny). *In practice, neighbourhoods require a range of different options for tackling problems that reflect the variety of different issues they face.*

4. Finally, the call to action is presently defined narrowly as an individual-triggered process addressing crime and disorder problems. *In practice, neighbourhoods face a wider range of common challenges and, in particular if incentives for collective action are established, could benefit from also having the opportunity to make positive proposals to public authorities.*

It is in this context that we feel the discussion about a community call for action needs to be re-connected to the wider debate about neighbourhood arrangements. Rather than considering the design of a single process, we should focus on creating frameworks for neighbourhood governance that are empowering, accountable and responsive. People should be offered opportunities to make a range of things happen in their neighbourhoods, by participating in decisions about public service priorities, holding service providers to account, and tackling problems at a neighbourhood level – identifying issues, and, where appropriate, participating in the development of solutions.

A wide range of systems and processes are already in place to tackle problems and complaints, and new proposals to empower neighbourhoods to tackle local problems more effectively should build on existing arrangements. Neighbourhood management and warden schemes are a good example of how problems can be solved quickly and effectively at a very local level without recourse to scrutiny or other formal complaints procedures. Anecdotal evidence from partners in the Transforming Neighbourhoods consortium suggests that much more could be done to improve public information and awareness of existing local authority complaints procedures, in particular, the type of issues that local authorities are able to respond to. Local authorities are often challenged about poor services that they are not responsible for delivering and have no power to influence. Better public understanding about who is responsible for service standards might reduce frustration on both sides.

Although there is much good local practice already in the UK, elements of a more effective framework are lacking. Our analysis suggests that rather than thinking in isolation about triggers and contract processes, what is needed in this territory is:

- 1 Simple, more readily available tools for gathering together priorities, actions and expectations and bringing together citizens and services in a neighbourhood (**charters**)
- 2 More effective, active and practical **scrutiny** systems (including area-focused approaches, rights of scrutiny over mainstream services, and innovative practices such as neighbourhood inquiries)
- 3 A **strengthened role for local democratic representatives** (neighbourhood councillors or councils) to work as community advocates and act directly to tackle small problems
- 4 A set of opportunities for **bottom-up community initiatives** to tackle persistent problems or make positive proposals, which would include the community call to action via councillors, but also give greater effect to petitions and other kinds of initiative
- 5 Enabling Local Government Ombudsmen to take up **collective grievances** in certain circumstances, and with respect to the administrative aspects of calls to action
- 6 Better **information rights** – lack of available knowledge about issues is often a barrier to constructive engagement by citizens, representatives and officials alike at neighbourhood level.



The elements outlined above have been identified not just because they may lead to better outcomes, but because each of them can contribute to supporting local organising, partnership working and the development of collective efficacy. Opening up these avenues in the right way could reduce the barriers for engagement, encourage representative, participatory and partnership processes to work in greater harmony, and build local capacity and connections between citizens.

The **development of people’s capacity and ability to take up the opportunities offered** must inform the overall approach to neighbourhood arrangements, and is necessary if citizens and representatives are to be in a position to engage more constructively in local decision making, community planning or participatory budgeting processes, and in the development of agreements about local service priorities. The role of institutional design in reframing incentive structures and supporting capacity-building is often

underestimated. But investment and resources are also needed to encourage participation in a range of neighbourhood activities (not just around one-off problems), to help **build organising, scrutiny and advocacy capabilities**, and to foster a sense of ownership so that people can recognise problem-solving as a collective rather individual responsibility.

It is an implication of some, but not all of these recommendations that a modestly higher level of resources may need to be invested in improving the quality and responsiveness of decision-making, policy formulation, partnership and scrutiny processes. This needs however to be set against the substantial costs of – to take just three examples – judicial reviews, failed housing ballots and top-down consultations; and the more substantial indirect cost of suboptimal policies and public services.

Events, strategic issues and performance standards

Broadly speaking, neighbourhood problems can be divided into three different categories:

1) Events

Simple but highly visible issues that often concern environmental problems or events (eg. the fridge in the hedge, litter or graffiti).

2) Strategic Issues

Complex and less visible problems that are driven by dissatisfaction with the overall approach or strategy of local authorities (eg. policing or youth services).

3) Performance Standards

Problems that may arise where public services are failing to meet expected standards or to deliver sufficient value.

Different types of problems demand different kinds of responses. For example, **direct action** might be the most appropriate route for tackling a simple, visible problem like the fridge in the hedge – for instance, enabling a neighbourhood councillor to call on service providers or a small enabling budget for prompt removal of the fridge, or to have access to a van that local people can use to get rid of it. Some parish councils and neighbourhood initiatives already do these things, but there are cases in which incentives may need to be reconfigured. (While an individual can dispose of a fridge for free but may not have transportation, public bodies are charged for disposal of dumped fridges. If other similar issues are identified, a case could be made for a regulatory review to identify and address disincentives to collective community action.)

A more complex issue concerning strategic direction might call for a **neighbourhood inquiry** as a practical and effective way to gather evidence and scrutinize neighbourhood issues; while problems concerning performance standards might suggest recourse to the **executive, regulator or ombudsman**, or other forms of **contestation** to drive up quality.

Careful thought needs to be given to how a call for action might work in different service areas. This is particularly true with respect to ideas that have been circulating about a community right to trigger the **re-tendering** of underperforming services, or other forms of challenge. If such a policy is pursued, consideration should be given to what services are open to contestation: grass-cutting? maintenance? schools? public health? It is important that safeguards should be in place to prevent negative impacts on the interests of the wider population. Careful and detailed policy development would be needed if triggered action were intended to be automatic in any case.

Neighbourhood Charters or Agreements

The government has now committed itself in the Respect Action Plan to giving “every area the chance to have a neighbourhood charter”. Charters or agreements have several merits:

- 1 They can provide a more solid basis for partnership working in neighbourhoods
- 2 They can set out agreed priorities or action plans
- 3 They can establish expectations and baselines for service standards and provide a framework for agreement on variation to meet local requirements, even mechanisms for redress
- 4 They can be shaped participatively by and involve commitments from citizens as well as from public service providers and representatives, for instance through Community Service Agreements
- 5 They can help to empower and build the capacity of local citizens and other partners.

These elements are analytically separate and there are few cases where they all exist together. It would be unrealistic and counterproductive to expect neighbourhoods to tick all these boxes. We would suggest that, while people in neighbourhoods everywhere should have the opportunity to develop charters, this is a process which takes time, needs to fit itself to local circumstances, and is unlikely ever to extend to every neighbourhood. It is presently not clear how the “chance” would be extended, and by whom it could be taken up. It could be initiated either by the local authority, or bottom-up via locally elected representatives and/or public petition. It is important that, if “neighbourhood charters” are understood to subsume and develop other elements of current practice (from estate agreements to parish charters), the detail of this is worked through to ensure that existing practice is not curtailed and can provide a firm platform for further development if required.

Charters can be used to build *a framework of mutual trust and obligation* between neighbourhoods and service providers, to progressively improve services and co-producing relationships. There is a real danger that over-contractualisation of arrangements could create a barrier to improving services, or breed conflict and animosity rather than a virtuous circle of collaboration. A complementary balance will need to be struck in every case between the clarity of expectations that service baselines and rights of challenge and response can bring, and the more subtle web of informal relationships and commitments which is at least equally important.

Baselines will be particularly crucial where a collectively-consumed service is considered to be poor, or where the community is considering variation or contributing additional resource to a particular area: although they are confined to council-parish relationships, parish charters currently set out basic levels of service which enable the parish council to raise funds specifically dedicated to achieving more. Sheffield's Burngreave NDC, where after years of stalemate and mistrust the "Advancing Together" agreement established baselines for mainstream service provision level that enabled NDC funds to be transparently dedicated to achieving better outcomes in particular areas, is another case in point. There is a perception that too many special area initiatives have been undermined by reductions in mainstream service support. Without a firm basis for trust, communities are less likely to contribute to improving local public services and spaces.

The mixed experience of tenant compacts should be learnt from. In many cases insufficient consultation or capacity-building took place, and the box of public involvement needed simply to be ticked before the deadline. Equally, individual rights to swift property repairs, when made justiciable, were sometimes exploited by opportunistic lawyers, and large individual damages awards coming directly out of council budgets then made further repairs for the common good more difficult.

Given this experience, and JRF evidence from the Foxwood Estate, there are arguments in favour of using informal, plain-language agreements rather than detailed legal contracts to set out arrangements between neighbourhoods and service providers. Learning from Foxwood suggest that such agreements provide a more flexible and productive framework for engagement, offering partners scope to be creative in developing solutions to problems.

Case Study: Foxwood Neighbourhood Agreement, York

The Foxwood “Neighbourhood Agreement” launched in 1998 provides us with one case study of how local involvement can empower residents and improve services. Foxwood, a mixed tenure area of 1,363 properties, had concerns about vandalism and lack of youth provision. This prompted the City Council, in partnership with residents, initially to develop a community safety and crime initiative that focused on inter-agency solutions and community empowerment. A series of other agreements between local residents and service providers have since been developed. The agreements take the form of succinct statements of background information, targets, response times and contract points. These agreements are then monitored by a community Action Group and more formally within a local partnership structure. The Foxwood partnership comprises residents, service providers and elected members.

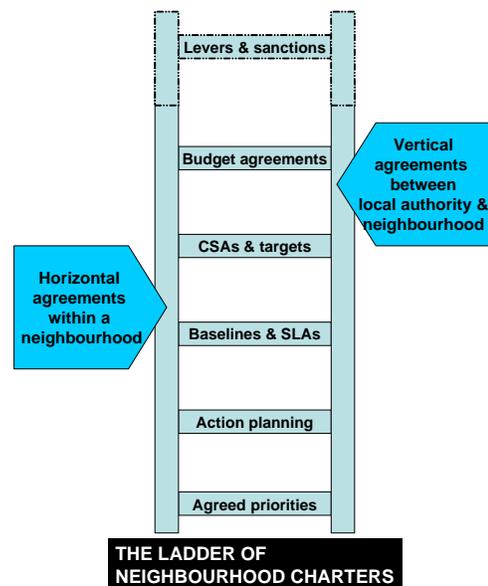
The monitoring has enabled residents to continually hold service providers to account and makes resource allocation and target setting more transparent. Inter-agency working, the empowerment of local residents (both through the monitoring process and skill development) and the improvement of services have all resulted from this small-scale project. Concerns which are likely to arise elsewhere include lack of involvement from the broader community, difficulty engaging owner occupiers and difficulties in raising interest in issues and service improvement rather than just physical renovation. While the Foxwood project has enthusiastic buy-in for future development from local residents, service providers and the council will need to work hard to improve capacity and enthusiasm if more advanced forms of scrutiny and participation are to be successful.

Table 1: From Joseph Rowntree Foundation (October 2000), Neighbourhood agreements in action: a case study of Foxwood, York

It is important that charters are meaningful, practical and clearly communicated for citizens. They should be developed participatively between people in neighbourhoods and public authorities (rather than simply requiring service providers to come up with another paper agreement arrived at without real involvement). People should be given full opportunity to participate in processes of agreeing service priorities, and be in a position to understand what they can do when things go wrong.

There is an initial distinction to be drawn between specific neighbourhood-level charters for the partners in a neighbourhood, including the council, police, the PCT, schools, community groups and neighbours; and more general authority-wide strategies or frameworks (such as parish charters) which include overall service baselines and vertical agreements between public authorities and the group of neighbourhoods about who does what, which can then also provide a general framework for how budgets and responsibilities could be delegated.

In the case of neighbourhood-level charters there is a ladder of issues which could be agreed upon and included, ranging from a simple agreement on local priorities, to service level agreements, targets for improvement, or Community Service Agreements under which the community itself takes on responsibilities – although there are still questions to be answered about who could do this on local citizens' behalf, and how.



Any agreement between people in neighbourhoods and service providers will also have a vertical dimension, given the larger geographic scope of the service providers. But those providers are likely to find it easiest to vary service standards on the basis of some authority-wide agreement of baselines, priorities and opportunities, which could potentially be set out in the context of the Community Strategy, and be supported by the establishment of a clear *duty to cooperate* and other measures to provide firmer basis for LSP working.

We therefore recommend that specific neighbourhood-level charters should only be developed over time in the context of capacity-building processes, rather than (say) being required in every neighbourhood in the country by a certain date. They should be considered as one of many tools in the box. However, “neighbourhood strategies” could be required between service providers, public authorities and people in neighbourhoods for each local authority area, setting out baselines, commitments and opportunities for that area. Neighbourhood charters could more easily build on such a pre-established baseline to respond to local variation in needs and conditions.

Practical Scrutiny at Neighbourhood and Area Level

A number of assessments of the establishment of new political arrangements after the 2000 Act have called attention to the limited effectiveness of the new framework for scrutiny and overview, although good practice exists in places. Scrutiny of neighbourhood issues and non-council public services is particularly lacking, due to a complex range of issues around structures, resources and powers to hold to account. Residents and neighbourhood groups should however have more opportunities to hold service providers to account and monitor decisions that affect neighbourhood service standards.

As part of a broader reform of scrutiny, we would therefore recommend the introduction of neighbourhood or area-level scrutiny processes as an opportunity for sustained monitoring of service standards and decision-making at neighbourhood level. The aim would be to increase the potential for local representatives and citizens to engage practically in identifying and tackling problems locally, not to create additional administrative functions duplicating what is already happening elsewhere. A future system should work to ensure that full scrutiny, local area investigations, public service accountability structures, the work of representatives and that of local citizens are better-integrated and mutually supportive.

A light touch, practically-focused form of neighbourhood or area based scrutiny will be able to achieve things that full scrutiny cannot, and should lighten its load. It will provide an “early-warning” mechanism to identify problems as they arise locally. It will address the criticism that principal authority scrutiny committees are too distant from neighbourhoods to effectively deal with street level problems. Finally, neighbourhood scrutiny presents new opportunities for engaging residents.

There is considerable scope to experiment with new formats for neighbourhood scrutiny to make the process more accessible and meaningful for citizens. The argument in favour of enabling residents and other public figures to be involved on neighbourhood scrutiny panels alongside elected members is a strong one. In part this is because their local knowledge and experience will be invaluable in developing practical solutions to neighbourhood problems, and will help to make the process more transparent, responsive and innovative.

Clear guidance could be provided to clarify the relationship between neighbourhood and principal authority scrutiny processes, the issues that should be addressed first at the different levels, and the process of referral from one level to another. Principal scrutiny also needs to be given greater purchase over mainstream services and LSP processes.

Neighbourhood Inquiries

We recommend that councillors and recognised neighbourhood bodies such as parish councils are given the power to establish occasional, time-limited neighbourhood inquiries as a swift and responsive mechanism to tackle complaints about a persistent neighbourhood problem.

In certain circumstances neighbourhood inquiries could provide a viable alternative to principal authority scrutiny by fulfilling two functions: first, enabling neighbourhoods to organise rapidly to investigate a persistent problem, and second, to engage residents and community groups in developing solutions or a local action plan. When they progress to the latter, they can function to support the implementation of scrutiny recommendations in a way which is often blocked.

There should be a degree of flexibility concerning the arrangements for instigating and organising neighbourhood inquiries. For example, a councillor, a principal authority, a legitimate neighbourhood body, or possibly even an independent organisation, could be empowered to establish neighbourhood inquiries of varying character and degrees of recognition and resource. These could be chaired by a ward, parish or neighbourhood councillor, and include local officials, elected members, public authority representatives, service providers, community groups and citizens. Councillors should be empowered to call relevant officials to give accounts or co-opt others to take part in the inquiry.

There may be a role for public petitions here, as a tool for groups or individuals to raise issues for consideration by a neighbourhood inquiry, gather evidence and suggest possible action. However, we must consider the need for thresholds to ensure that petitions are not used by a minority to force inappropriate issues on to the public agenda, and the value of having elected councillors centrally involved in scrutiny processes. The councillor's involvement could be necessary if resources are to be allocated.

Neighbourhood inquiries could therefore provide an effective, time-limited and economical way to focus resources and attention on problem-solving, by bringing together partners to focus on practical action plans. The Young Foundation plans to work with local authority partners to develop and pilot neighbourhood inquiries in the near future.

Empowering neighbourhood representatives

Elected representatives at ward, parish or neighbourhood level should be equipped with the powers and budgets to address neighbourhood problems, including funding to take direct action to address small “grotsspots” and lead neighbourhood scrutiny functions, the power to call neighbourhood inquiries, and to carry an issue through the principal authority scrutiny process. Where appropriate, neighbourhood-level councillors should be empowered to co-opt elected members, officials and public service providers to participate in neighbourhood or area-level scrutiny committees. Councillors should be encouraged to adopt a position as neighbourhood advocates, championing solutions to local problems rather than acting as gatekeepers to the problem-solving process.

We recommend that both ward and parish or neighbourhood councillors, provided they are elected democratically, should be permitted to accept and respond to a community call for action. This could be one element of a closer relationship between principal councils and neighbourhood-level councils, the outlines of which have been sketched elsewhere.

In multi-member wards residents should be able to present a call for action to any ward councillor, who can then take it forward themselves or hand it over to another elected member better suited to take forward the issue according to their capacity or specialist expertise. However, the process of passing a call for action to another member should not be an excuse for the issue to be delayed or blocked, and there should be a feedback process to ensure that citizens know how and where responses are being formulated.

Residents in parishes should be able to present a call for action to a parish councillor for two reasons. First, the parish councillor may be able to solve the problem effectively without needing to involve a ward councillor, and second, residents should be able to take a pressing problem to their nearest elected representative, at least in the first instance. Parish councillors should be able to determine whether they have the resources, capacity or skills to respond effectively to a call for action, or whether it could be handled more effectively by a ward councillor.

Enabling residents to present a call for action to any elected member in their parish or ward may limit the extent to which individual councillors who may be acting in an inadequately representative fashion (whether through lack of capacity, private interest or party political constraints) can block worthwhile initiatives, while empowering those representatives who are responsive. As experience with neighbourhood management pathfinders has established, manifest evidence of substantial public concern is one of the best levers for influencing service providers.

Local Government Ombudsmen

There is value in considering how the role of Local Government Ombudsmen could be extended or evolved to enable them to play a greater role in monitoring the handling of calls for action. If their ambit is extended to include the administrative handling of those collective grievances articulated through a

community call to action or initiative, they will be empowered to establish whether appropriate processes are followed, and whether adequate responses are provided within the established timetable – say, 28 days for a substantive response. Alternatively, Government Offices could take responsibility for monitoring responses to calls for action, but their local legitimacy is less solid. Inspections and evaluations (in particular if they become more community-based) provide an ultimate recourse for assessing how these opportunities are used.

From Triggers to Community Initiatives?

The term “trigger” has unfortunate connotations, given the damage gun crime has done to some neighbourhoods, and its implication of automatic, unreflective action. We would suggest that “community initiatives” is a better umbrella term, especially given that most of the initiatives being considered will require consideration of what the appropriate action might be. There might then be a portfolio of opportunities through which community initiatives could be taken forward:

- The individual call to action via ward councillors, as outlined in the Police and Justice Bill, but broadened to encompass other issues
- Petitions supporting a call to action or particular proposal, which could also be carried via the ward councillor process but might require more substantive and public response if they reach certain thresholds
- Specific cases where petitions or community calls lead more directly to action – for example, the existing right to petition for the establishment of a parish council, or in future, for changes in school provision or for a “community right to buy” as in Scotland
- Ballot initiatives that establish the level of whole community support for important issues, for example through reforms to the parish poll mechanism

Developing the Community Call for Action mechanism

As explained above, our aim should be to minimise the likelihood of neighbourhoods needing to resort to calls for action by creating a range of more collaborative opportunities for them to address problems. But there are strong arguments for a call for action process to act as a stopgap when other attempts to tackle a problem have failed.

The call to action involves demanding that something is done, but it may not immediately be clear what action should in fact be taken. The call should therefore establish a **right to audience, investigation, reasoned response and action only as appropriate** – in general, triggering a process of governance rather than direct change. That process will need to be carried out with some speed and to some effect if it is to be meaningful and satisfactory for citizens.

Councillors should be obliged to respond to a legitimate call for action in a specified timeframe, but empowered to choose an appropriate response, depending on the nature of the problem. As previously suggested, they should be able to take direct action to address straightforward issues (drawing on specified budgets if necessary), facilitate discussions between a neighbourhood and service providers, initiate a neighbourhood inquiry, refer a problem to neighbourhood or principal authority scrutiny, or if necessary take it to the ombudsmen. We recommend that individuals and groups are able to trigger a call for action within local competences by presenting evidence of a persistent issue to their elected representatives (ward, neighbourhood or parish), individually or collectively as appropriate.

A future local governance White Paper could usefully develop the community safety call to action mechanism in three ways:

- It could extend the opportunity for calls to action or community initiatives beyond crime and disorder to a **wider range of local issues**, including environment and potentially planning
- It could establish public collective rights of audience, investigation and reasoned response by the council and other public services to calls for action supported by **petitions** of a certain size
- It could make it clear that the mechanism can be used for **positive proposals** made by petition, as well as for calls for action relating to persistent problems.

Robert Putnam's study of the civic renaissance in Portland, Oregon since the 1970s shows that quite modest reforms, building the capacity of neighbourhood associations and giving them a general right to make proposals (including on land-use) and to be responded to, had a profound effect on the social capital and collective efficacy of the population, creating a "call-and-response" dynamic of responsible empowerment which bucked the US-wide trend. Planning and land use was one of the most effective areas in which these proposals were permitted. We would therefore recommend that this should be included in the framework for any petition-based community proposal or call for action.

It could be required that calls for action are supported by proof that attempts have been made to tackle the problem using other means. This could include evidence of complaints (and responses) raised with a local authority or other service provider, information about efforts to raise a problem at an Area Forum or committee or parish meeting.

Petition-based community initiatives and public scrutiny

Public petitions are an accepted mechanism for raising issues and public awareness, and understanding of how to use them is high. They are already used by the Scottish Parliament and by 10 Downing Street. Strikingly, there is no systematic evidence of how much they are used in English local government, or of what kind of influence they have. However, anecdotal evidence indicates that while they can often articulate divisive, misleading or negative sentiments, they can also have a significant effect on building community capacity and coherence, and if responded to appropriately, can also support mutual understanding and trust between authorities and citizens.

Particularly large petitions already often elicit some kind of response, but local authority respondents acknowledge that some substantial petitions raising important issues simply gather dust after being noted in a committee meeting, because there is no structured framework for investigating the grievances they raise or providing them with substantive response. Other petitions that may be misframed or factually inaccurate continue to gather thousands of signatures against the local system, simply because no engagement has taken place.

At present the call to action process involves no right of investigation or response, except from the individual councillor contacted. We would therefore suggest that calls to action which are supported by a certain number of signatures could require a more public right of audience, investigation and response:

- If a call to action is supported by (say) 3%-5% of the ward, parish or neighbourhood population (250 in an neighbourhood of 5000 people, 500 in a ward of 10,000) it could require consideration at a public meeting in which local democratic representatives come together to address the issue being raised, and to which those representatives can call officials from the relevant public authorities, e.g. the police or school;

- If it is supported by 1% of the population of a public authority (2000 people in a unitary of 200,000) and is not resolved by local councillors, a call could go forward to the executive, requiring some officer time to be invested in assessing it and a reasoned public response by them or the appropriate committee, with some opportunity for dialogue or challenge;
- A similar threshold could apply for devolved structures – for instance, the devolved districts in Birmingham.

All petitions which meet these thresholds could be made public on the council's website, along with their response. Thresholds could be higher or lower but should be set to ensure a substantial basis of support, and on the basis of careful consideration and evidence: the figures given here are only indicative.

Clear public guidance should be produced to specify the conditions that must be met for any call for action to be legitimate (including advice about other mechanisms that must be pursued first). Guidance should include simple and straightforward information about the type of issues that can be considered, who can propose a call for action, the responsibilities of petitioners and councillors, and the requirements that must be met for any petition to be admissible.

It would be sensible politics to seek the active support of councillors as such petitions are formulated and taken forward. Petitions may be most effectively advocated with the support of a councillor, and sensible elected representatives will be keen to engage with them. But a petition with many hundreds of signatures represents a considerable articulation of popular will in itself, and regardless of how representative of the wider community it is, merits a right of public audience and response (if only to clarify its flaws). Of course, some serious issues may only affect individual residents or a small minority, but in these cases the councillor can carry the issue forward irrespective of the petition avenue.

Individual councillors should not have a general right of veto over whether a petition-based initiative is considered, though good practice might involve engaging at an early stage to assist in more constructive framing. However, they should be able to reject a call for action that does not meet specified criteria (eg. lack of proof that other avenues to address the problem have been exhausted, or a petition without the requisite number of signatures), although this should not prohibit residents gathering further evidence and resubmitting a valid petition.

Further development of the call for action framework could also enable the articulation of positive proposals by communities through this petition avenue. For example, neighbourhoods could be empowered to suggest changes or innovations in service delivery, in situations where service providers are under-performing or where local authorities or public bodies are not meeting needs that could be fulfilled by community or voluntary organisations. As in Portland, planning issues could be included. There would of course be no requirement to comply with the proposals, which might run counter to the interests of the wider community. But such channels of voice, where appropriately managed, have been proven to have a beneficial effect on community capacity-building and attitudes. Councillors should be able to use meetings, neighbourhood inquiries and even parish polls to consult communities on proposed innovations. People in neighbourhoods should also be able to use counter-petitions.

Some concerns have been raised about using petitions to trigger a call for action: in particular, that a minority group would be able to force an issue that may not be in the wider interest of the community simply by collecting the required number of signatures. It could be specified that signatures are gathered only from residents of the neighbourhood (or group of neighbourhoods) affected by the problem, and names and addresses are supplied to allow a councillor to validate the petition. However, it should be acknowledged that many neighbourhood problems will cut across administrative or electoral boundaries, and may impact on people who live in one neighbourhood but are affected by poor youth, leisure,

or environmental services in the neighbourhood where they work or where their children go to school.

Regardless of how neighbourhoods are empowered to call for action, there is of course a risk that demands will be articulated that are not in the interest of the majority of residents. This takes place at present, sometimes through the representative process, sometimes in the pages of the local media; it is a possibility through any formal mechanism. However, a right of audience, investigation and reasoned response (rather than forcing action) can assist in clarifying the impact of such popular demands and stimulating more constructive engagement. It is important that we avoid being drawn into opposing participatory to representative democracy when in fact they can interact very constructively, as this case study from Staffordshire makes clear.

Stone Library, Staffordshire:
A Petition, An Inquiry and Creative Problem-Solving

As part of the renewal of its library service, Staffordshire County Council began to consider plans for improving Stone Town Library in 2001. After public outcry at the proposals put forward and the raising of a large petition, a practical scrutiny process led by a local councillor identified an innovative solution not previously considered.

Staffordshire had tried hard to consult on developing library plans with residents across the county, with town and parish councils highly involved and focus groups with the public and library staff to throw up concerns and possible solutions. For each library, redevelopment working groups involving residents were established to monitor the process.

Stone Library, located within the old market area of the town, had only one storey and too small a footprint to serve the needs of Stone's expanding population. Many options had been considered by the working group to try to update the library on its present site, but none was possible within the £500,000 budget allocated. The working group therefore considered two other options: to find another, larger old building which could be refurbished, or to move the library to the town council offices (about 500m from the original site) and to develop a one-stop shop for council services. After analysis the working group decided the latter would be the best option.

However, a large and vocal opposition soon developed to these plans. The situation fast became fractious: library staff encouraged opposition, accusations of political negligence arose and resentment developed toward officers working on the project. The local population quickly lost faith in the council's consultative process and rumors circulated about future plans.

This led to the creation of a petition that opposed the *closure* of the town's library – although the plans put forward had only suggested its *relocation*. The petition gained over 10,000 signatures, testifying to the strong sense of civic ownership attaching to the library, but also to a fundamental problem of trust and understanding in the wider community. It became clear that a fresh approach was needed. But the process had reached a stalemate, with officers and the working group unable to see a way forward.

As the accusations and infighting grew, the council decided to scrutinize the process through its Cultural and Recreation Committee. The scrutiny was led by an energetic young councillor who was keen for all sides of the picture to be heard. Over a month, in-depth interviews were undertaken with all parties involved. This defused the situation and allowed time for a more objective assessment on all sides.

Architects, engineers and builders were called back by the scrutiny inquiry, and a 'Eureka moment' took place. The architect and builder identified a new and affordable option: to drop a steel frame into the building, enabling the construction of a mezzanine and increasing the footprint sufficiently to allow the library to stay in its current location.

This practical and locally rooted scrutiny process ensured a fair and open hearing, prevented staff from revolting, and improved trust and credibility in the system. It showed that large-scale public concern would be taken seriously, increased public understanding and demonstrated how the representative democratic process of local leadership could identify a new, more acceptable and innovative option. While the process was time-consuming, one officer involved describes it as very worthwhile – a "catalyst to finding a solution and uniting all levels of government to take responsibility."

Reforming local polls

It is also worth considering how the existing parish poll system could be adapted to make it more effective and accountable, given that there may be cases in which ballots are the most appropriate tool. But the present poll process has serious flaws. Through a petition of six electors or the decision of a parish chair, a parish meeting can be called on whether a question should be put to popular ballot. But the poll will then be called if it receives the support of 10 people or one-third of electors present, *whichever is less*.

Parish polls have often been used successfully in recent years to articulate popular consensus on issues such as the closure of local lidos. Although they have no direct purchase on principal council decisions, they have often resulted in change, and sometimes in the parish agreeing to raise their precept to contribute toward gap-funding local services. But the present framework is unacceptable: such polls can involve thousands of pounds of expenditure (often more than what it would cost to implement the recommendation), but can be triggered by a small minority. It is also important to exclude polls being called on non-local issues, such as the national currency.

These failings could however be corrected, for instance by requiring a higher threshold – say, at least 3% of the population to call the public meeting, and securing the support of over half of those present at the meeting for holding the poll. There may not be many issues on which a local ballot is useful or required, but it could be worth making a revised parish poll framework available in unparished wards, with safeguards such as requiring the consent of local councillors. Given the mistrust and difficulty encountered in many areas around housing ballots, it is worth reflecting whether many might not have been more successful if initiated bottom-up, both in terms of levels of resident support and buy-in, and in terms of the quality and responsiveness of housing providers.

Conclusion

In summary, we recommend that:

- 1 Calls for action should be considered in the overall context of new neighbourhood powers and arrangements and opportunities to engage neighbourhoods in new forms of problem-solving. Policy should therefore focus more broadly on a range of processes and tools which could empower people in neighbourhoods to influence public service priorities and identify and solve problems.
- 2 A clear but flexible framework for neighbourhood charters needs to be established in the context of existing practice and with regard to future LSP changes. A balance needs to be struck between formality and service standards, and flexible, informal agreements that provide scope for neighbourhoods and service providers to work collaboratively together to achieve improvements. LSP strategies should establish a set of common-denominator terms which local neighbourhood-level charters, where they are desired, could then build on and vary.
- 3 Calls for action should be clearly positioned as a last resort. The aim should be to encourage collaboration between neighbourhoods and service providers to solve problems, using charters and agreements as tools to aid this process.
- 4 We propose that large petitions should be given rights of public response, and the parish poll system reviewed.
- 5 A combination of institutional redesign, support and investment will be required to build the ability of people in neighbourhoods to take on a more active role in decision-making. At the same time, support will be needed to enable elected neighbourhood representatives to become more active community advocates for local interests, and to build the capacity of local authority officers and service providers to work in partnership with neighbourhoods.



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

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