

# TRUST COMMUNITIES TO TAKE THE LEAD

COMMUNITY ORGANISERS  
NETWORK RESPONSE TO ICON  
GREEN PAPER



## Background

The Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (ICON) was launched in 2024 to review the current state of neighbourhoods across England. Additionally, the independent body has also tried to understand what has worked or failed in previous attempts to support them. Based on this, it has written a Paper called ‘Delivering Neighbourhood Renewal: Proposals for Change’ to make a strong case to Government for rethinking how it could support low-income neighbourhoods. The Commission has invited Community Organisers to respond to their ideas.

## Our Response

This is our collective response to the proposals in the Paper. We have listened to our network to understand what they think about the proposals put forward. The sixteen organisers who have contributed to this paper have many decades of experience between them organising in low-income communities around Britain. In addition, many have significant experience of delivering programmes as part of previous Government funded regeneration efforts, and as such, have a clear-sighted understanding of what works and what doesn't. We know what they have to say will be a valuable contribution to the Government's next steps when thinking about how to invest in the neighbourhoods in question.

## This Report

The following document responds to the questions included in the Green Paper most relevant to the work of our network. In over 14 hours of one-to-one and group interviews, we asked our contributors to respond to approximately ⅓ of the questions included in the Paper (mostly from Chapters 1 and 3). The responses will be shared in the form of direct quotations from the organisers themselves.

Read the full report: <https://www.neighbourhoodscommission.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Driving-Neighbourhood-Renewal-Proposals-for-Change.pdf>

## Contributors

**Askia Warne - Founder and CEO at Centre for the Advancement of Development and Human Rights (CAD-HR) and Manor River Union Social and Economic Community.** CAD-HR is a UK-based not-for-profit non-governmental charitable organisation based in London with a branch in Sierra Leone. It aims to contribute towards ending poverty, hunger, and empowering women in the poorest parts of the world. It's business-model uses a community-led approach that works with communities in identifying, developing, implementing, and expanding local industries for victims of child marriages and other forms of gender-based violence. Manor River Union Social and Economic Community was set up by CAD-HR as a socio-economic support structure for descendants from West African nations living in the UK. The MRU organisation consists of voluntary organisations, businesses and individuals originally from these countries.

**Beth Powell - Managing Director at Creative City England CIC** - Creative City is a social enterprise that is building community power, creatively. Delivering empowering arts projects, events, collaborations and campaigns in the heart of Greater Manchester's vibrant communities. Beth is an artist with a background in youth and community work, vcse sector support, policy and influence, and facilitating community-driven change. She is a trained community organiser, legislative theatre practitioner and has facilitated citizens juries and participatory budgeting processes in Greater Manchester.

**Deb Baker – Director at Community Roots CIC.** Deb's background is in the creative sector - from running community workshops through to business management. Over the last 20 years, she has been involved with supporting many communities of interest. From 2021 to 2024 Deb was involved in developing Feeding Gloucestershire and she continues to support the work of Nourishing Gloucester and Good Food Cheltenham and the Cheltenham Food Board. Deb is currently supporting the development of two community enterprises in the Westgate Ward of Gloucester. Community Roots CIC have been pioneers of Community Organising in Gloucestershire and have built up a portfolio of evidence to show that using this approach creates positive change..

**Dominic Taylor - Action for Nature Manager at Warwickshire Wildlife Trust.** Dominic was part of the Locality Community Organiser programme in 2012 and has been a community organiser ever since. He has worked for My Time CIC, Birmingham Settlement, Grapevine Coventry and Warwickshire before joining WWT. In his current role, he works with communities across Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull to help achieve Warwickshire Wildlife Trust's goal of 1 in 4 people taking action for nature, to help put nature into recovery by 2030.

**Emma Spence - Community Projects Practitioner at Riverside Community Health Project.** "My role is to support people to access training, community coach trips, welfare appointments, and other activities at Riverside. I also promote and support community-led action as part of Riverside's Community Action on Need project by working alongside community members to tackle important and concerning issues that matter to them, while striving for positive change within the community."

**Leonie Schmid - Community Organiser at Grapevine Coventry & Warwickshire for Connecting for Good (CfG).** She supports various CfG initiatives such as Destination Ball Hill - a collective of residents, businesses and community leaders, in making their area cleaner, greener and by creating community spaces - and Resting Spaces, a neurodiverse group fighting to create free spaces to rest & a sensory library. CfG initiatives are part of an organised, community-led ecosystem; building cross-initiative infrastructure, developing leadership, connection and collective power for systemic change. Grapevine's vision is local citizens with the skills and confidence to act on what they care about; connecting through their shared humanity, taking power into their own hands and regenerating their communities.

## Contributors

**Lou Horsefield** – CEO at **Riverside Community Health Project** (RCHP). RCHP is a community-led charity based in Benwell, in the West End of Newcastle. Riverside's vision is for the West End of Newcastle to be a healthy, thriving community, which we work to achieve through our mission, which is to improve the health and well-being of disadvantaged communities in West Newcastle by working with community development principles and collaborating with others to respond to need. Based in a deprived area in the City, with a very diverse population, Riverside runs a range of services from its community building, the Carnegie Building.

**Rosie Apperley** - Project Coordinator & Administrator at **Octopus Community Network**. Octopus is a mutual collaboration between 14 of Islington's largest multi-purpose community centres. They collaborate to co-produce and co-deliver programmes, projects and activities informed by local communities, always following a community-led development approach.

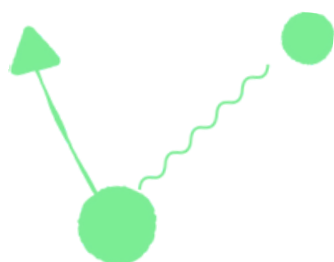
**Rupert Wansbury** - Decision Maker at **Gaunless Gateway Big Local Partnership**. Rupert has played a key role in the decade-long Big Local regeneration programme, where £10m over 10 years was granted to a local partnership.

**Samantha Lewis** - Community Organiser. Samantha was part of the original community organisers programme in 2012 and has continued as a practitioner since then. In particular, her work in Camden focuses on local growing and community energy projects as a way to empower and nourish.

**Sandra Beeton** - CEO at **Social Benefits Consortium**. Sandra is currently developing a digital compendium of all Charities and Social Enterprises across the UK. She previously led a small infrastructure charity for volunteers in the Youth Justice system called the Association of Panel Members.

**Simon Redding** - Co-Founder of multiple VCS organisations and freelance consultant. Simon is a community development practitioner with decades of experience and has co-founded and either directs or sits on the board of trustees for Cannon Mill Trust CIO, Monkey Park Community Enterprise, Barrow Hill Community Trust, amongst several other organisations. Simon also consults for local/regional non-profits and statutory authorities on community-led regeneration & placemaking.

**Tim Oshodi** - Community-led regeneration consultant at **Survey Design Partnership**. Tim was a self-builder and project manager of Fusion Jameen. "We are Europe's largest Black-led eco self-build of socially rented homes. I then became a founder member of Downham CLT, integrating the lessons of community self-build into wider neighbourhood regeneration. Our asset-based approach seeks to develop a trauma-informed approach to land use to strengthen the social capital of a neighbourhood, maximising the community wealth building and health equity impact of Downham's outstanding assets."



## Key Principles

When we listened to these organisers offer advice on the approach Government should take to neighbourhoods, we identified the same principles coming up repeatedly....

### Listen, listen, listen...

Development must begin with listening to residents' lived experiences, concerns, and aspirations. Consultation as a tick-box exercise is not sufficient; people must feel heard and understood on their own terms.

### Co-Governance

The voices of residents must have the same weight as power holders. Decisions, budgets, and governance structures should be co-owned with communities. Councils and public agencies must devolve power and trust residents to lead.

### Trust and Accountability are Earned

"Trusted institutions" must be trusted by the community, not just by the government. Relationships and trust are earned over time, through consistent listening.

### Build Capacity and Leadership from Within

Organising is about uncovering hidden leadership and building confidence and skills. People must be supported to step into their power at their own pace.

### Tailor to Local Contexts

Each neighbourhood is unique, shaped by different histories, cultures, and needs. Successful programmes must reflect local identities, not just data zones or national templates.

### Join Up Services Around What People Need

Services should collaborate with residents to meet real, felt needs - not deliver pre-designed programmes. Integration must happen at the neighbourhood level, not just between institutions.

### Safeguard Against Tokenism and Capture

Programmes must guard against co-option by elite interests or existing powerholders. The community voice must be protected through clear rights, transparency, and accountability.

## Chapter 1 - A new national neighbourhood intervention

**This chapter essentially puts forward some suggestions for how a new national programme for building social capital and infrastructure in ‘critical’ neighbourhoods around the UK could work.**

### What approach should be taken?

**Most respondents warned against a prescriptive, outcomes-focused approach to a new neighbourhood intervention:**

“There have been a lot [of programmes] initiated by either local authorities or the NHS and other major institutions and a lot of communities don’t engage with the new services that are designed for them simply because they feel like they’ve been used to tick some boxes. And so, for me, it’s about keeping it open and not just focusing on the outcomes.” (Askia)

“You can take elements of learning from one community to another, but there is no broad stroke here. There is no one-size-fits-all.” (Deb)

**Instead, they favoured a flexible, outcomes-based approach and argued this requires careful observation and learning from what is working or not:**

“I’m a firm believer in iteration and development... it has to be an iterative approach. It has to be a learning-based approach.” (Deb)

“Building flexibility and learning into whatever’s happening will take you away from the original plans quite considerably, so you have to monitor deviations and justify them.” (Sandra)

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### How should the limits of the neighbourhood be defined?

**All respondents agreed that people in neighbourhoods should define their areas, warning against the use of definitions that have been applied externally:**

“What’s the point of using LSOAs if nobody knows what it refers to?” (Sandra)

“Westgate has 4 LSOA’s and overall Ward data is skewed by the fact one of them is not too disadvantaged.” (Deb)

However, a few respondents noted that it can be challenging to reach a consensus on the boundaries of certain neighbourhoods:

“I don’t know where I live. Older residents here will tell you it’s Saint Peter’s. Much older residents will tell you it’s Lower Dockham. And if you look at local government, I’m actually classed as Swindon Village. So where do I actually live?” (Deb)

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## Which neighbourhoods should receive support?

Some respondents questioned the accuracy of the data used to determine the 613 ‘mission critical’ neighbourhoods.

“None of the social capital and social determinants of health data is available at neighbourhood level, let alone LSOA. Decision makers are operating blindly.” (Tim)

One respondent also argued that certain types of data are not included in the research meaning the picture of neighbourhood deprivation is incomplete:

“There’s a very strong link between health inequalities and poverty. But there’s no integration of that at the neighbourhood level... There’s no integration of health inequalities with race equality nor disability equalities – although this gets us much closer to the reality of the situation.... Also, the nature of the problem varies between each neighbourhood. So, you need to have quantitative neighbourhood data alongside the lived experience of people in the neighbourhood. This can be achieved by the Integration of community health impact assessment with the joint strategic needs analysis.” (Tim)

In any case, most respondents stressed that whichever neighbourhoods are selected, the learnings must be applied to all neighbourhoods across the country.

“Irrespective of the neighbourhoods chosen, the lessons from the programme need to be practiced in all future neighbourhood based work.” (Tim)

## How should the programme be delivered?

Most respondents broadly agreed with the four-stage approach set out in the Paper.

All respondents stressed the need to include residents from the beginning:

“I don’t think a plan should be created and then residents are asked to get involved. We need to be making sure that their views are feeding in from the very beginning. When it’s done that way around, they don’t always feel like there’s any point in saying anything because they feel like it’s already been decided on.”  
(Emma)

One respondent suggested how this might look in practice:

“Personally, I think residents are best placed to decide what the model should be that best works for their community. I think a randomly selected group of citizens could make up a citizens jury. They can be offered the information needed, they can interrogate local power holders and those stakeholder organisations who want to be part of the fund’s governance, and make a set of recommendations about how to govern and develop the fund or programme locally. This would require a good facilitation team and a toolkit with a range of options and clear explanations of the various governance models, with really well communicated examples of how it could play out on the ground.” (Beth)

A few respondents suggested that participation isn’t always easy in reality:

“But it’s also remembering that because of all the complexities that exist in an area, people’s ability to engage and participate will be affected by more pressing things that are happening in their lives... They’ll be supposed to come to a meeting and then, your landlords sold your house and you’ve got to find somewhere else to live. And all of a sudden, you couldn’t. You could replace that with any other type of issue.” (Lou)

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## How should the programme be managed?

Most respondents argued that if a trusted organisation already exists in the area then it should be the anchor:

“So, if there’s already social infrastructure there, why do we have to create something new? It is just about strengthening what’s already there - that seems a better way forward. Obviously if there isn’t anything then yes, but most in my experience, most communities have something there, so it’s a case of supporting them.” (Samantha)



“You would need to involve an organisation or people that the local residents already know and they’ve already got a relationship with, because then if an institute’s just created for this purpose and none of the residents know who they are, what they’ve done, they’re not going to be wanting to go along and take part because they’ll probably feel like it just won’t work towards their agenda, whereas if it’s like an organisation that already exists, they’re familiar with them. They trust them because they’ve worked with them before. I think they’re more likely to participate.” (Lou)

**However, all respondents stressed the importance of thinking carefully about which organisations are ‘trusted’ and by whom:**

“Trusted organisations’ is interesting phrase. Are they trusted by local communities or Government? Should be trusted by local community – that’s the important thing. Some organisations are very trusted and doing great work and others are chosen because they’ve just been around for a long time.” (Deb)

“The process of identifying who are the community anchors is important. Do the decision makers know how the neighbourhood really works? How long have the selected community animators been in the community? How can they demonstrate that they have the trust of the community?” (Tim)

**Some respondents argued that no single organisation will be trusted by everyone, so several organisations should work together as anchors:**

“No single organisation is going to be absolutely trusted by every single resident... But if you have a community centre as a main anchor, think how could that link into the local churches or the local mosques and then into some specific groups and build that network to ensure that there’s someone involved that is a trusted organisation for someone in the area.” (Rosie)

**Most people also argued that the board should include ‘trusted’ residents, too:**

“We had one local woman that sat on our big local board. She said ‘I don’t understand why I’m here. What is my value?’ But she knew everybody. She was liked and trusted by everybody. I didn’t know a single person would say a bad word about her and everybody that knew her would basically say, Oh yes, salt the earth. She’ll help you. But you know, she was a mother of four, didn’t recognise she had any skills whatsoever, worked in the local school, didn’t think she had any value, didn’t understand that her voice was probably one of the most valuable in the room because she actually was community. But if we can’t get those people onto these boards. If what we’re getting is the doctor that’s been put on a pedestal because he’s a doctor. Versus the person that actually lives and breathes community. What are we missing?” (Deb)

## Some suggested specific governance arrangements...

I'd recommend a caucus (USA local electoral unit) instead of a board. In this model, you've got representatives from small frontline charities, individuals with lived experience and protected characteristics, with equal voting rights to agency participants. The caucus would have decision making powers over the whole intervention, including budgets. The community organisers would pull it together and act as administrators, also convening the underpinning Citizens Assembly. Caucus operates in a collegiate way with rotating chairs; votes on all matters must record the Small Charities' and Lived Experience/Protected Characteristics representatives' positions" (Sandra)

## Others suggested that there's no single approach

"Can they be structured by each of the neighbourhoods to suit the neighbourhood?" (Deb)

## Should the local authority be involved?

### Almost all respondents argued that the anchor organisation(s) should be independent from the local authority:

"So I think that the potential risks are around people's lack of trust and faith in not just the local authority, but various statutory organisations, the police, etcetera. So, they would need to be on a level playing field with the residents so they can feel like the Council haven't got more power." (Lou)

"The ideal would be that the council would say that neighbourhood decision making for this intervention is going to sit with these people and we they're going to report to us on what they're doing or whatever, but we're not going to be part of the decision." (Lou)

"A lot of organisations (local authorities, the NHS and other Statutory Bodies) have tried to build relationship between with the charity sector. For example, the GLA did a similar thing with migration, and so I was part of that panel as well. But the work didn't take off because initially the advisory panel was independent, but then as the work progressed the council tried to push their own agenda and shifted the priorities of the panellists to the side. And so, the panellists then disengaged because they saw they were being undermined. And so, these are the power imbalances working with local authorities or government institutions and now feedback from panellists or fellow steering group members is that we've been here before. And we come with our brilliant ideas and then they take that they turn it into something else and we are excluded and so the trust is not there." (Askia)

“I think communities, if supported, they can work by themselves, and because they are the ones with the problems and they’ve been living with those problems, for God knows when, and so most of the time they know the solution and it’s just that they don’t know how to get it done or if they get it, how to maintain it, and so if they are supported from from the behind, they can do amazing things. I think at this point is just to reemphasize the need to always think about the communities and putting them in the driving seat and supporting them from from the shadows. ‘cause that will help them grow. That will help them and feel empowered. That will help them to become independent and resilient. And the approach I’ve been using so far is to tell them don’t be afraid to make mistakes and we’ll learn a lot more from our mistakes than the things that we we get right and easily. And so that gives them the confidence to to try to keep trying and and by by doing that they grow. And the the the way the mind work is the more you engage, it’s the more it expands and the more it expands the, the, the more you. You are innovative or creative.” (Askia)

There’s a very different relationship that people have with their local authority and it makes it really difficult for proper engagement and community organising to happen if the council try and do it. So the investment should come to the community organisations that can then work with communities to decide what they need in their neighbourhood” (Rosie)

“The local authority are often not best placed to deliver in places where there’s a real lack of trust with kind of formal institutions.” (Rosie)

“A project called Nature Neighbourhoods we are involved in has identified 3 anchor institutions. Two of them are community centres, part of our network that have been in existence for like over 40 years and are hopefully not going anywhere. So they’re able to kind of carry that long term and keep that legacy going and also have the trust already with the with their communities. They’re not a kind of intimidating place for people to to go and have quite a different approach to the local authority.” (Rosie)

“This is about investing in the people closest to the problem and the local community organisations that are driving forward the change. So, it should be about investing into local organisations and maybe organisers who are working with local people rather than investing into government or local government” (Leonie)

“In the Gaunless Gateway Big Local Project, if you’re a politician or councillor, you come along to a meeting as a person - not as a politician. So they come along as a member of the public, rather than with their official hats on.” (Rupert)

## What else should be considered?

Some respondents also advised that attention should be given to group formation:

“There will be conflict, so you need simple, accessible methods of conflict resolution... We use an outside organisation that does that who also take care of the emotional well-being within the partnership”. (Tim)

“When you’re forming partnerships, Ostrom’s principles [1] are important because they help define how people work together, especially when sharing resources. These principles help shape the foundation of the partnership” (Tim)

“I think if you were asking these sort of quite differently minded people with really different priorities and languages to work together, it would be helpful to start by coming up with uniting values. Because otherwise, how do you challenge anything? For example, how is a resident empowered to challenge a policy?” (Beth)

[1] Ostrom’s eight principles include: clearly defined boundaries, rules that fit with local needs and conditions, everyone gets a say in rule-making, monitors are accountable to the group, fair and gradual sanctions, quick and low-cost conflict resolution, the right to organise and nested enterprises.

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## How long should the intervention last?

Some respondents agreed that 10 years is enough time for a neighbourhood intervention:

“I’ve created communities myself and it takes at least a year and a half minimum for people to acknowledge you in an area. You know, and that’s by, doing pop ups, going out, speaking to people, that’s constantly pounding the pavements. It takes that time. So, if you’re constantly pounding the pavements for a year and a half just to get it just to get recognised, then to actually build something a bit more substantial, 10 years feels realistic.” (Samantha)

Others argued that 10 years isn’t enough:

I know 10 years is a long time, but it’s not. Whatever is it? It’s not like saying at the beginning of the 10 years for like a child. Which is five. When it ends, they’re 15. They’ve still got their whole future. What’s going to happen after that? Do you know what I mean? When you look at it like that? Like in the past one, there’s been like regeneration happening. It’s great for the 5-10 years that it’s going on. Yeah. And then once it’s over it just dwindles back to what it was before.” (Emma)

“For migrant communities and other marginalised communities that have endured inequalities and exclusions for quite a long time communities and neighbourhoods cannot be fixed within 5 to 10 years. It takes time to kind of give them that confidence and and build trust and and nurture those relationships before new programmes can can be kind of engaged with them” (Askia)

“I think 10 years is just enough to get people to trust each other and work together. However, the kind of funding that would support the social capital development is a much longer term than 10.... I would say thinking in timescales at least over 40 years is the key thing... Long-term financial thinking exists – look at bonds and pension funds. If you look at say, for example, when they’re doing the Kings Cross development in London, yeah, there’s all this speculative development. long-term investors saw that slow, steady growth at three or four percent based on building up a neighbourhood (not just quick speculation) was more profitable in the long run - even if the returns were modest. So if your aim is to change the systemic forces causing an issue, everything that you do, even within the 10 year framework, is looking to the 40 years horizon..” (Tim)

“I would say this is generational. In our theory of change, we’re putting 10 years on transformation, but you know with a recognition that that’s just to start seeing improvements. You know, we are expecting that this will be a generational activity over 30 years... We’ve got people who are coming out of schools with no qualifications and then having problems getting into work... At the same time, we’ve got people who are entering our primary school without basic skills to function – not a single child was toilet trained last year. Many don’t have motor skills. Some of them just can’t talk properly. So, we’re starting from a very low base. And when you look at that, you’re thinking, how long will it take to turn that round?” (Simon)

“I think it’s important to have stewardship as a value. That way, we can see things over the long term, over many generations.” (Beth)

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## What should the intervention focus on? What should it do?

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**All respondents argued that community organisers should be trained and supported to build the social capital and infrastructure in each place:**

“So if you’ve got a neighbourhood that’s struggling. It’s not confident in its own capacity. It’s not confident in its own ability to make change. You know, people within it don’t recognise their skills. They don’t recognise their talents. They’ve been labelled for so long and put in this box and then you’re going to take them out of this box and you’re expecting them to know all of these different things. You need community organisers to build them up first” (Deb)

“I think you would definitely need some community organisers in there. The community would need a lot of support early on, but providing them with training, and building their confidence so they’re then able to make decisions for themselves and decide what they want. Because A lot of people don’t have confidence or they’re socially isolated, and they don’t necessarily know what they need, or they might not know what they can ask for, so it’s building them up first. I think that would need to be a focus early on. Then once you’ve got a stronger group, you can begin bringing other people in like the local authorities or other local organisations, so they can work together.” (Emma)

“I think as pre-investment before the intervention, local people should be trained as community organisers, to understand the politics and the dynamics of that community and how they support and scaffold and hold that community. So we really understand what that starting point is and creating something that works from that minimum entry point and building up from that, but developing those local people to be able to meaningfully sustain or create some kind of legacy moving forward.” (Dom)

“You need a community organiser for 3-4 years for capacity and trust building and a lot of dedication to create these things. In the work in Bower Hill, I’ve actually had to do things like hire a double Decker bus and drive people to other communities and go look, this is how they do it. They see people really doing it for themselves and they’re shocked. I take them because they wouldn’t believe me unless they’ve actually seen it with their own eyes. So you know, there’s a lot of work there that’s actually needed to break down the barriers of repression, lack of inspiration, optimism, trust, so that people can actually start on this journey at all. And then there’s a lot of building up those people so they have the skills to do things. If they come in for a year and then they disappear again, they’re just another person who over consulted and under delivered, which is what they’ve seen for generations.” (Simon)

“I think one of the pros of Community Organisers is that it’s their main role and their main priority, whereas other organisations it would be time taken away from what they usually do. So, they might not invest.” (Emma S)

“Building the ‘scaffolding’ takes time, energy, effort, expertise and then care. This involves you go out and about, listen to people and uncover community leaders bring them together, organise them, build a capacity to identify some issues and projects and start doing community actions. You need five years minimum to create the strong scaffolding and then reap the reward and start seal the benefit from working in that capacity.” (Moussa)

“The key thing here is building strong communities. Dropping a community centre into a community is not building a strong community. It needs to be the real web of social contact. We have to build arrangements where communities trust each other and can deliver for each other. Then they won’t run in the other direction when anyone from the NHS or the Council or public health or the GWP or the police comes walking into the area, you know? So, we have to have communities that are internally strong, but also you know can actually build relationships and trust other.” (Simon)

“I think there needs to be funding into leadership development of the local people so they can lead their own initiatives.” (Leonie)

“Community organisers know how to support marginalised communities to win change. We develop the leadership and we organise with them. We campaign chart with them, we power map with them. Who are your targets? Who do we need to speak with? Who do you need to be in a room with and what are your asks? How do we work on your negotiation skills?” (Leonie)

“Community organising is not just about training people, it’s about helping people to understand what they’re capable of. I have a manager in the little community cafe that we’re trying to run at the minute. Her background’s catering. She hasn’t worked for 20 years because she had two sons with special needs, and she wants to manage this cafe. I took her through everything from taking her through pricing. She was constantly questioning herself asking what skills have I actually got? However, over the past, I’d say six months, the skill attainment level has just been astronomical.” (Deb)

### Some respondents supported investing in both community organisers and organisations:

“Obviously community organising is vital. You need organisers that can go out and spend more time out and about in the neighbourhood. But also having that backbone of a formal organisation that is trained in a community organising approach to hold the organisers, but also has a physical space that is often necessary just to do some of these activities.” (Rosie)

### Several respondents made the case for investing in physical spaces:

“Some of the feedback we’ve had recently in some of the conversations we’ve been having like places like we have a site that’s so important for people. They do really need like even if it come in like once a week to do an activity for an hour like it makes a big difference to them. But then if you invested just in community organising, they don’t have a place that’s that would be difficult as well. I think even just investing in a community centre for like an area that would already start the ball rolling to create that trust like ‘oh, this is like it’s a space for the community’.” (Emma S)

“A priority should be creating and investing in community spaces. In one of my areas Grow Farm, there aren’t many assets at all in terms of a base for the community to come together that we have a very, very old community centre, but it’s basically like an old caravan port cabin that was given to them from the school years ago. So we are working together to try and get the community centre up and running again, I have a small core group, but half of the people in Grove Farm don’t even know there was a community centre. So it’d be really nice to have a brick community centre functioning community centre because at the minute it’s not open. It’s only open when it’s an activity and we’ve got one pub if not everyone wants to go to the pub. And they did have a cafe that’s been shut down, so there’s nowhere in the area people to go really. So I would like to see a nice functioning community centre in that area.” (Michelle)



“The loss of all of those community assets has made the starting point for an organiser much more difficult. We haven’t got that place and space to bring people together to organise, to meet, to create strategy, to connect, to build relationships, to build trust.” (Dom)

### Some argued that money should be given directly to local people to do things themselves:

“A key goal should be to put money into the hands of local people to get on with the job. Lots of local people can do lots of the jobs. So for us Downham CLT, we built our own houses [2]. This is the asset based approach of time credits where everyone has something of value to give to the social capital of their area. I’m not a skilled carpenter, yet we built award-winning houses that were voted as the best public or private housing in Lewisham. So, it’s about looking at how you adjust your technology to maximise the people’s participation in the creation of the solutions. And that’s not just a theory, we have repeatedly shown it can lead to life transforming reality. Where a single parent of 3 kids in housing need builds her own home through a community build, then sets up a business employing 10 of her fellow builders and her the impact becomes intergenerational as her son follows his mum’s footsteps and builds his own home.” (Tim)

[2] <https://sites.gold.ac.uk/inlivingmemory/tomorrow-is-built-today/>

### One respondent argued that attention should be put into creating strong partnerships between civil society and the local authority:

“It’s little bit more than social infrastructure in the first phase. We’ve actually got to look at what creates partnership and what actually enables local people to trust authorities.” (Simon)

### All respondents agreed that investing in social infrastructure will support efforts to improve other issues:

“You prioritise the issues based on what people in the Community says, I can’t remember where it was, but for a lot of people they thought poverty was a big issue, which wasn’t affecting their community, but actually getting a crossing where their kids could just cross the road safely was the number one thing for them and the fact that they were listened to and were able to hear that then that’s. Then you can go into the bigger stuff. So you gotta start where people are at.” (Tim)

“The idea that we are doing is to have community-led spaces where the NHS share a space alongside other organisations. So we’ve created a space in our building which the NHS are basically leasing off us and we’re fitting it out on the condition that they will listen to local people. Combine that with the real stats on what people’s needs are in terms of health needs and then put in the services that are actually needed rather than the ones that they’re running in their own organisation and you’ve got an interesting model. So they have to actually share the space with up to 14 other organisations like GAM care or, you know, alcohol service from a charity or, you know, Citizens Advice because these are the wider determinants of health. We spent a year shaping that through an appreciative inquiry process with people like the Director of Public Health and if we hadn’t done that, then they’d still be trying to do stuff top down.” (Simon)



## However, one respondent questioned aspects of the developmental framework describing the trajectory from ‘highly disadvantaged’ to ‘thriving neighbourhoods’:

“I think we need to be careful about how we are using the terms ‘economically inactive’ and “integration into the economy”. This fails to acknowledge that while people – especially women – might officially be economically inactive, they might be doing full time unpaid care work. The unpaid care economy isn’t included in this framework of the formal economy and there needs to be a spotlight on that, and we need to ask whether the formal economy is offering the kind of paid work people need and can balance with their other responsibilities. The care demands and the unpaid labour involved in looking after a neighbourhood with such complex problems tends to fall on women. This burden is especially high because often the required services aren’t there or aren’t meeting local needs and so local women are doing all that unpaid work whilst there’s a poverty squeeze on them and are more likely themselves to have poor health and face higher instances of domestic abuse etc. We know that when community development centres women’s experiences, it benefits everyone, whereas when it ignores women’s experiences it fails. So I think there’s an additional bit of work to better understand the barriers for different social groups, including and especially women, and how best to facilitate their leadership in changemaking.” (Beth)

“Community infrastructure is dynamic and so just because it’s quite established doesn’t mean that it doesn’t need ongoing support and funding. Things are changing all the time and that there’s real risks of losing pieces of key community infrastructure, even when it’s quite established.” (Beth)

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## How should data be collected?

### All participants agreed that citizens should be valued as experts in their own lives:

“If they have dealt with you before and they don’t feel that you using them as a as a data collection point they will trust you.” (Askia)

“I think paying people for their expertise is a different thing from just giving us your opinion as £20 kind of thing that makes any sense.... So the data collection iitself can be a community empowerment process as the community are trained to be researchers of their community and can gather qualitative data because of their postion of trust..” (Tim)

## Chapter 2 - Rewiring central government to 'think neighbourhoods'

This chapter puts forward ideas for changes in National Government to support more social capital and infrastructure in neighbourhoods across the country.

### Neighbourhood Recovery Zones

Most respondents agreed with Neighbourhood Recovery Zones in principle, though some were nervous about their practical application:

"Ability to move at pace is good. But we know that the pace of the community usually isn't that fast anyway. And then I think this thing about having extra powers, being able to influence planning. It just makes me wonder if it's open to abuse." (Deb)

"I think with every case that comes up, I think it's a good idea to give extra powers to local boards as long as it's the residents that have the main seat at the table" (Samantha)

"Yes, we need extra powers, especially with regards to planning policy. The powers of neighbourhood plans have been diluted. There's no strength in the community right to buy. For example, I've tried to get community buyers in the past and the Council's just turned us down and we've seen there isn't even an appeals process. Communities also need to have access to compulsory purchase of empty properties. As another example, one of the two shops that's in the village that we're working and has been bought by a London-based investor and when the price of housing goes up, I think they'll probably convert it into a house, but for now it's just shut." (Simon)

## Chapter 3 - Empowering local government to 'think neighbourhoods'

This chapter puts forward ideas for changes in Local Gov to support more social capital and infrastructure in neighbourhoods.

### Neighbourhood Expenditure Audits

All respondents agreed with Neighbourhood Expenditure Audits in principle, though some were doubtful about their practical application:

"I absolutely think neighbourhood should know what money is being spent on. I think it's going to be one of the biggest headaches and it's a Pandora's box that [the council] might regret... But I think that understanding of what money comes in, where it goes to etcetera is essential. But if that information is not publicly available, where's the accountability?" (Deb)

“At the moment it feels opaque. For example, recently there was some money given as a backhander by a local crook to the Council, and it was done in a meeting just between him and the deputy leader of the Council who was married to the leader and the lawyer of the Council. So, nobody will tell us what happened in that meeting or how much money exchanged hands, although we know it’s about 40 grand and the money was apparently reserved for spending on our community. If local authorities can hide it, they will. They’ll just call it commercially confidential or something.” (Simon)

“This very much depends on granularity. How public money flows can be very different. Even within a few 100 yards in communities. You can go to quite a posh area and all the potholes are filled and there’s nice benches and lovely flower planters down the street; then you go the other side of the tracks and it’s looking really ropey and none of that’s been done and there’s litter on the streets and the gutters obviously haven’t been swept for months. And you think, how could this happen? But it does. Granular open data at the LSOA level would be very helpful for understanding this flow of public money.” (Simon)

“I think the catch that local authorities actively refuse to disaggregate their contracts. So they’ll sign up the contract for the whole borough to do some work and some areas that receive where they receive regular complaints from counsellors will have more work done on them than others. But when you ask the local authority how much they spend on the park, they’ll only tell you how much they spend on parks in general – not in that particular neighbourhood. So the way that local authorities are managing their reporting on their expenditure might be an obstacle”. (Simon)

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## Neighbourhood Agreements

**Several respondents believed that neighbourhood Agreements do not go far enough and that more fundamental shift in how power is shared with civil society is needed:**

“I would like to see the ability for local authorities to actually share the load. So if residents say, how about we do a litter pick and cut the grass once a week and then we’ll do the fence painting the following week. The council said litter picking was okay but told us the health and safety rules wouldn’t allow us to paint a fence and that there was no flexibility in the contracts for grass cutting. We even asked if we could do an asset transfer of the park into the hands of the community but they said they were locked into service contracts for 10 years. I’ve had so many groups that have done things like tried to create flower plants and the Council come along and destroyed them because they don’t meet their design standards. So you know, we didn’t have a dialogue. In order for community organising to be successful, people need to feel that their voices can be heard and that they can actually negotiate with the local authority now, particularly when they’re offering to do stuff! It’s about power and it’s about control. It’s about risk and it’s about negotiation and flexibility. Ultimately, councils need to know when to get out of the way.” (Simon)

"We need to make the services personal as well. If we stick things in formal standards agreements and they're not allowed to do anything that's not on the list they can't do things that residents ask them to do. Then they become really cynical about what they do. In our case, we've got a local council person who come and sits behind our community hub for three hours having a yak, having a sandwich, you know, couple of cups of coffee, that kind of thing." (Simon)

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## Neighbourhood Budgets

**All respondents strongly supported the idea of Neighbourhood Budgets:**

"Our public health department at a county level gets £74 million to spend each year as a budget. And they drop £100,000 of that down to a partnership board that decides how to spend it. They're probably going to spend about 1/5 of that because 4/5 of it is already decided by the Council - so you might be getting £20k out of £74 million that's actually got a community voice involved in it." (Simon)

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## Neighbourhood Respect Duty

**Most respondents broadly supported the idea of a Neighbourhood Respect Duty:**

"If a neighbourhood wants to speak to those in power, they should have the ability to do it." (Deb)

"It seems a bit crazy that that's not the case anyway - they are public servants. Residents should be able to access people from their local authority." (Rosie)

**One respondent argued that the duty does not go far enough and must be supplemented with legal powers for the community to hold the local authority to account:**

"The community needs access to their own legal power resources. Developing strategic litigation strategies or community lawfare is a key tool to ensure that the community comes to the negotiating table around neighbourhood regeneration as an equal partner. The representation will often become corrupted unless it is held accountable, power needs to be explicitly exposed. Getting to the table is one thing but when you are there the use of approaches like transformative scenario planning for systemic change is crucial to build consensus amongst stakeholders for systemic changes which tackle root causes in a sustainable manner." (Tim)

## Right to Request Time

### A few respondents strongly supported the Right To Request Time:

“On one of our projects we had a community conversation with residents about the changes that people want to make and we had someone from the Council come along and just explain the process if you want to have a new growing space, including the process that the Council have to go through to set it up... When they heard the explanation, people understood that often, you know, the council's hands are a bit tied. They have to go through lots of consultation and make sure they're ticking boxes, which isn't a bad thing at all. Having that transparency and being able to have that conversation and understanding a lot of the residents felt “I get it now - I understand the process you're going through”. So this showed me that it doesn't have to be this clashing thing if we're all just a bit more open with each other. So, in the context of the neighbourhood intervention, I think probably this would have to come with places for there to be explanation and questions and answers and conversation around it. So that residents can understand some of the decisions that are being made. And I think that, you know, the Council are often a bit reluctant to do that. But if it's kind of facilitated in a positive way it can actually be really beneficial to both sides.” (Rosie)

“All Council staff here do have a couple of days and technically that they're allowed to help out the community. So, we were trying to do some rough calculations on how many Council staff they are, how many days aren't being used, because as far as I'm aware, it doesn't happen in reality. So, it's great in theory there are these days that a lot of organisations have, but how can it actually happen and in some kind of coordinated way.” (Rosie)

### One respondent felt that five days was not enough time:

“I'd say more than five days. So, if we take the example of debt, we know lots of people are struggling with it. Citizens Advice is totally overburdened. So you need to get people in who can offer proper advice and help people on that sort of thing, perhaps even help them how to do, how to, you know, get an accountant to show them how to budget, you know, things like that, you know, having workshops and things like that.” (Samantha)

### Most respondents argued that instead of the Right To Request Time, council officers should have a duty to time in the community:

“I think the five days is pointless. What we actually need is a duty to work with community organisations.” (Simon)

“Maybe what should happen is this: spend five days together, have lunch, sit in meetings, and actually take time to get to know people. Crucially, people—especially decision-makers—should walk around the neighbourhood with resident community animators. Right now, many of the decision makers know an area by a map, and they miss so much because they don’t take the time to really see it. Instead, they might come for five minutes, do a quick walkaround, and because everything looks tidy—especially when it’s been cleaned up for a visit from important guests—they leave thinking they understand the place. But they don’t. To truly understand the area, they need to talk to the people who live and work there every day. And those conversations shouldn’t happen behind closed doors. They need to be open, public—so that even the people who come along just to complain still get heard. That’s important. You need to hear what people are really feeling, even if it’s hard. That’s how you get a true picture of what’s going on.” (Tim)

## Right to Control Investment

### All respondents strongly supported the idea of a Right to Control Investment:

“Residents should be involved in the oversight of the work as well, like when big projects happen. So, people are involved across that investment, rather than just deciding whether it happens or what the money is spent.” (Rosie)

“You could use professionals to help local people to understand the right to control investment when government investing in an area, so local residents can help to decide how the money is spent.” (Samantha)

“What they did was empower the staff from the service managers right down to field staff to talk to local residents to find out what they wanted. Everyone had to agree to spend a certain number of hours working within a certain community. So there’s a dialogue with the community about what they want them to do with those hours.” (Simon)

“It all comes down to how you define ‘community-led’. We’ve just had a £25m town deal in one of our areas – yet only 1 out of the 11 projects is actually community-led. But the Council have enough paperwork in their possession to say that they have consulted everyone fairly. Local residents haven’t actually helped decide and now quite a few of them are ticked off about it. And this erodes democracy.” (Simon)

“When you’ve got counsellors who have been in their role for 30 years and they’ve promised things for a long time, you’re not going to talk them into doing something else.” (Simon)

“The Council will come up with the list of what they want to spend it on. They’ll leave maybe 10% that they’re not quite sure what to do about. However, even that consultation will be done in such a way that they can pin their existing projects on to what people said.” (Simon)

## Final Words

**In the responses to this Paper, we have repeatedly heard that many low-income communities feel fear and apathy towards change.**

“I’ve noticed something come up a lot in the communities I work and that’s fear. It’s a fear of failure. There’s almost a lack of expectation of what they’re capable of. There’s a lack of acknowledgement that they are more than they are because some of the estates are dumping grounds historically, and people have come to the conclusion they were dumped there for a reason, as if they’re worthless. So it’s how do you rebuild worth?” (Deb)

**The community organising approach was by far the most popular antidote. Community organising builds confidence and social capital in communities to overcome injustice.**

“The community organising approach is to start with the listening. Getting the residents to come up with the ideas where they can so they’re driving things forward. But those ideas should come from a blank canvas rather than a menu of ideas or anything like that. It has to really come from that first question, ‘How do you feel about your local area?’” (Rosie)

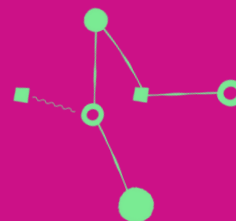
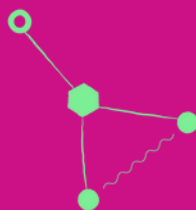
“You know, we shouldn’t be doing for people what they can do for themselves, we should be supporting them to get there.” (Deb)

“We have to enable the communities to sort things out themselves and be in charge of them in certain ways and work with local authorities and statutory organisations. So I’d say there needs to be a lot more focus on a duty to collaborate and work with and design together. This also means community capacity building to help local people to feel inspired and want to take a lead and be organisers themselves and be social entrepreneurs.” (Simon)

**By letting communities take the lead, the Government will win back the trust it has lost.**

“It’s not the government doing us and communities a favour this money, right? This is a chance for the government to actually build back trust in communities that they’ve really lost over the last decades. This is an opportunity for them to work together with the community and actually having the communities be experts, making them stronger and having community led changes that actually work. I mean this will work in the long run for the cities if we actually listen to the communities and work with them on the solutions.” (Leonie)

**The responses in this paper amount to a call for a radically different way of doing place-based change: one where trust, time, humility, and resident leadership are the cornerstones.**



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