Act Local: Empowering London's neighbourhoods

A Centre for London essay collection

As a society, we believe that decision making should come closest to those it affects most. London is no exception. With a growing population of nine million residents, complex, difficult trade-offs must be made to ensure that London can become a fair and prosperous city. Remote, top-down decision making can only take us so far – and Londoners agree.

This essay collection examines the role of neighbourhoods in shaping the city, strengthening community and enhancing public services. It brings together expert perspectives on neighbourhood planning, technology, social infrastructure and London's local governance, outlining the challenges faced in translating community initiative into impact.

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction: Neighbourhoods in context

As a society, we believe that decision making should come closest to those it affects most. Demands for agency and control over the decisions that affect us are being made from all quarters of the UK. There is a sense that our democratic institutions and processes are too distant from those they represent.

London is no exception. With a growing population of nine million residents, complex, difficult trade-offs must be made to ensure that London can become a fair and prosperous city. Remote, top-down decision making can only take us so far – and Londoners agree.

While local government is traditionally the most trusted of all government levels,[1] there is evidence of a disconnect between Londoners' desire to be involved in local decision making and their simultaneous perception that they lack the necessary influence. Over the last five years, almost 65 per cent of Londoners have consistently agreed that it is important to be able to influence local decisions – but only around 35 per cent thought that they were able to do so.[2]

When it comes to new development and planning in London, the feeling of disaffection is particularly strong. Recent research has shown that only two per cent of people trust developers to act in an honest way when planning and executing large-scale development. Similarly, only seven per cent of people trusted local authorities to act in the best interests of their local area.[3]

This essay collection examines the role of neighbourhoods in shaping the city, strengthening community and enhancing public services. It brings together expert perspectives on neighbourhood planning, technology, social infrastructure and London's local governance, outlining the challenges faced in translating community initiative into impact.

First, however, this introduction reviews the case for neighbourhood engagement as well as some recent policy initiatives, drawing on a literature review and interviews with local authority ward councillors in London, senior local authority and Greater London Authority officers, parish councillors, community activists, civil society organisations and Business Improvement Districts.

The case for neighbourhoods

In London's current democratic setup, the default unit of governance is the London borough. While the Mayor's office is responsible for setting out the strategic vision for the capital, the vast majority of decisions that impact Londoners' lives on a daily basis are taken at borough level. The modern boroughs were explicitly designed to be big enough to raise money for services, and prestigious enough to attract good quality politicians and staff.[4] With the exception of the City of London, boroughs now have an average of roughly 275,000 residents.

Boroughs may be an efficient scale for service delivery, but this role should not obscure the importance of neighbourhoods as spaces for accessing jobs and services, anchors for identity and social integration, and places of participation.

The function of the neighbourhood as a place for making social connections and meeting basic needs has particular importance for policy. The importance of neighbourhoods – the scale at which much of everyday life takes place – is backed by substantial evidence. Our immediate locale and the interactions within it affect the jobs we can access,[5] the goods and services we make use of,[6] our health and wellbeing,[7] and our social capital and connections.[8] For those on lower incomes, geographical proximity to jobs and services is particularly important.[9]

London's neighbourhoods are also places of identity, with the smaller pre-1965 metropolitan boroughs continuing to dominate.[10] Identities are not fixed or exclusive, however: the intersections of class, ethnicity, age, sexuality and employment status[11] all play a role in determining the extent to which Londoners define themselves as being "from" or "belonging to" a neighbourhood, as do the local specificities and histories of each place.[12] For Londoners, neighbourhoods are also the spaces of predictable encounters, fulfilling basic needs such as shopping, healthcare, housing and education – and identities are additionally shaped through these functions.[13]

Given its role in forming identity, the neighbourhood has particular relevance for encouraging social cohesion and integration. Local institutions at a neighbourhood scale have particular potential for creating spaces where people can share experiences and build positive

relationships. The Mayor has recognised this in the Greater London Authority's (GLA) Social Integration Strategy, which defines its core concept as:

"Social integration is the extent to which people positively interact and connect with others who are different to themselves. It is determined by the level of equality between people, the nature of their relationships, and their degree of participation in the communities in which they live".[14]

Neighbourhoods are also the spatial level at which many citizens are best able to participate in governance. For many years, the parish was the default unit of governance, also functioning as the focus of community and voluntary institutions aimed at meeting social need. Today, it is argued that bringing decision making closer to people improves public participation, accountability, responsiveness, and effectiveness – even creating some efficiency gains.[15] People care about issues that impact them directly and show preparedness to organise around them; with greater public participation, needs can be better understood, and decision makers held to account more effectively.

In view of neighbourhoods' relevance to people's daily lives – as a source of identity, a locale for integration, and a focal point for public participation – how has neighbourhood governance evolved in recent London history?

How are neighbourhoods represented in decision making?

This section reviews how neighbourhoods are engaged in local governance – through the existing democratic structures of councils, through ad hoc partnerships and initiatives, and in recent years through legislative innovation.

Local authority structures
The nearest proxy for a neighbourhood in local government is the borough ward. Outside the City of London, each ward in every London borough has three councillors representing it, and typically 10,000 to

20,000 residents. Each councillor is elected first and foremost to represent their ward constituents in council decision making: however, in practice, the extent to which this voice is heard can vary dramatically. Recent national research found that minority group councillors – and councillors without leading executive or scrutiny roles – often find it difficult to access information, administrative support, and skills training. [16]

One of the reasons for this stems from the sometimes conflicting roles that councillors fill – as representatives of wards, members of a political party, and holders of executive and/or scrutiny roles which were separated through the provisions of the Local Government Act 2000. While reforms under the Local Government Act 2000 were considered to have strengthened the executive and leadership role of local government, backbench councillors did not find their role enhanced.[17] Similarly, those reforms didn't impact significantly on public involvement in decision making.[18] One senior borough officer interviewed for this report observed that the resources allocated to train and support ward councillors vary widely between London boroughs, and that different councillors undertook varying amounts of outreach, surgery and public accessibility work.

Most boroughs have (or have had) ward-level committees and decision-making forums, with varying levels of budget for ward projects. Again, however, this provision varies substantially between authorities. Where ward budgets do apply, they tend to be of a relatively small value – ranging from £10,000 p.a. in Waltham Forest to £46,000 in Westminster (reduced from a 2010 level of £100,000 p.a. in the latter case).

Local authorities are also required by law to consult on local plans and new developments. Nonetheless, there are recurring complaints about the extent of influence residents actually have in these processes. One frequent issue is that consultations are seen as box-ticking exercises – with opportunities for residents to comment after plans have already been developed, rather than having an influence on the plans at an earlier stage.

It is important to note here the broader context in which local authorities are operating. The ability to support ward councillors, provide dedicated funds and engage meaningfully with communities in planning processes is impacted heavily by resources, which have been heavily constrained since 2010.

However, there also exist long-standing cultural tensions that can stand in the way of local empowerment. Government institutions and community organisations have not always worked together well; and the culture of public service provision – whether paternalistic or consumerist – can be at odds with community organisations, who consider their legitimacy to arise from their embeddedness in a place, their connection with an issue, or their common vision, rather than from a particular governance structure. This can make for an awkward fit and a reluctance on the part of local authorities to share power – though one officer we interviewed noted that where there were more active community campaigns and organisations, ward councillors were incentivised to respond and engage more, particularly in inner London.

1960s-1980s: The rise of urban policy

In recognition of the importance of neighbourhoods, a variety of public policies have sought to enhance community and neighbourhood involvement. Attempts to tackle "problems of the inner city"[19] in the late 1960s gave way to the Community Development Projects of the 1970s, gradually becoming more strategic programmes aimed at neighbourhood regeneration. In the case of the Single Regeneration Budgets and New Deal for Communities of the 1990s, they were also increasingly focused on participation and partnership working among different actors.[20]

2000s: Business Improvement Districts

Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) are designed to better involve businesses in neighbourhood governance.[21] BIDs are business-led partnerships in small defined geographic areas where businesses agree to pay a levy to raise extra funds for improvements to the area, in order to support trade and the local economy. Every five years the BID must be subject to a ballot of local businesses to renew its mandate.

BIDs were introduced to London through the Circle Initiative, a programme of five pilots supported by Single Regeneration Budget funding in the early 2000s. They were placed on a statutory footing in the following years, and the first BID went live in Kingston upon Thames in January 2005.[22] Since their introduction, the number of BIDs in London has steadily grown to 63. Across the city, BIDs have been responsible

for significant projects targeted at public realm improvement and local economic growth[23] – though critics have questioned the balance between public and private governance, and what this means for accountability.[24]

The traditional conception of the BID as providing flowerpots and benches for the high street may be true in some instances, but there are examples of more innovative practice. For example, Camden Collective, a project of Camden Town Unlimited BID, provides free hot-desking space and subsidised offices for creative startups in repurposed, formerly empty buildings. Providing incubator space while finding a new purpose for vacant buildings shows how the BID model can be used creatively to support local economies.

2000s: New parish councils

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 enabled the creation of new parish councils in London for the first time in over 75 years. Restoring a local tier of permanent representative democracy with tax-raising powers and the ability to determine expenditure in local areas was much heralded at the time as a remedy for some of the democratic "distance" between communities and power.

However, to date, the new powers have not been taken up widely in London. There have been only two attempts to establish parish councils in the city. One was successful: Queen's Park Community Council in the City of Westminster, which maps onto the Queen's Park ward boundary. The other attempt, covering Spitalfields and Banglatown wards in Tower Hamlets, was not successful, with the local authority refusing the application.

Slow progress in London has been attributed to a lack of awareness about parish councils and ward governance, and the long years of community organising and development required to navigate the bureaucracy of establishing parish councils. Others have cited the difficulties involved in neighbourhood organising within a city as transient, diverse and unequal as London.[25] There is also a perception that rural, homogenous and affluent communities may be more suited to 'parishing'.[26] That said, several Community Councillors in Queen's Park expressed almost precisely the opposite view: one said that "*economic empowerment and political enfranchisement go together*";

another that "*a reason I joined was that you're fighting for a better life for the people of Queen's Park who live in a very disadvantaged and poor area*".

Case study: Queen's Park Community Council

Three factors may help explain why Queen's Park's Community Council has been successfully embedded. First, local context matters. The Chief Officer for the Community Council explained that despite being socially mixed, Queen's Park has a particularly well defined urban fabric and geography that lends it a distinctive neighbourhood character.

Capacity building has taken time. In Queen's Park, the Community Council's legitimacy is seen to have stemmed from good existing partnership working, and an established democratic civic culture. For example, having managed Neighbourhood Renewal Funds, the existing neighbourhood forum had several years' experience of regular elections as well as years of support from a long-established voluntary group, the Paddington Development Trust. A City of Westminster ward councillor for Queen's Park ward explained to us that this is "fundamental to its success".

Finally, political issues have been addressed. Queen's Park is also a Labour ward in a Conservative-controlled borough. The local ward councillor explained to us that the local Labour group decided not to stand for the parish council on a party ticket, to avoid building in oppositional politics.

2010s: Localism

One of the more significant recent developments in neighbourhood governance was the Localism Act 2011. A close relation of the 2010-15 coalition government's "Big Society" agenda, "localism" was understood as serving the goal of decentralisation[27] – a shift of power away from the central state and towards local councils, civic society and voluntary organisations.

The Act created three "Community Rights", the effects of which we will look at in detail:

- Neighbourhood Planning and Community Right to Build
- Community Right to Bid
- Community Right to Challenge

Neighbourhood Planning and Community Right to Build
Neighbourhood planning allows neighbourhood groups to create a
third "tier" of planning regulation. Groups can set planning policies
for their neighbourhood, provided a required governance process and
structure is followed. Similarly, a Neighbourhood Development Order
(the Community Right to Build) allows groups to grant planning
permission for particular developments they would like to see.

In many respects, this has been by far the most successful of the
Community Rights. To date, there are 13 adopted Neighbourhood
Plans across seven boroughs in London. There are also 79 community
groups officially designated as neighbourhood forums, at various
stages of the approvals process. Neighbourhood planning potentially
offers significant community impact on the physical fabric of our
neighbourhoods, harnessing local knowledge and creating a more
participatory local civic culture.

However, take-up has been inconsistent between and within
boroughs. Almost half of the plans made are in Camden, and there are
nine boroughs that have no designated neighbourhood groups at all.
Those areas that have managed to see their plans through to approval
have tended to be in wealthier neighbourhoods, raising questions about
the relevance or accessibility of neighbourhood planning for more
deprived areas.

A recent report also highlighted concerns about the amount of
time, resources, skills and bureaucracy required to successfully "make"
a neighbourhood plan.[28] Similarly, attitudes towards and support for
neighbourhood planning wary widely between boroughs and planning
authorities, in some cases limiting uptake.

Community Right to Bid: Ownership of local assets
The intention behind the Community Right to Bid was to allow local
communities to protect land or buildings with a community use and value.
If a property is listed as an "asset of community value", it becomes subject
to a six-month delay period before it is sold, to allow community groups
the chance to raise funds and bid for the property. As of September 2018,
337 assets of community value have been listed across London.

However, there is little accurate data available on the assets that have

actually been purchased by community groups, as no central register is kept by government. Attempts at estimating the number of listed assets which are purchased by community groups nationally suggest it is as little as 15 of every 1000 assets listed.[29] In London, only one Asset of Community Value has been bought and operated by the local community under the 2011 Act – the Ivy House pub in Nunhead – though the designation has helped other venues to resist changes of use.

Take-up has been low partly due to the high costs of land and property in London. Organising funding in six months is another hurdle, especially for community groups in more deprived areas. Even if funding can be organised, the owner is under no obligation to sell to the community group. This is in contrast with similar legislation in Scotland, which allows community groups first refusal on sale of land which they have registered an interest in protecting.

However, despite the limitations of the Right to Bid, local involvement in owning and managing neighbourhood assets does in fact take place across the city. Community Asset Transfer predates the Right to Bid, and involves transferring the operation or ownership of physical assets from public bodies to community groups. Originally proposed as a way to use existing public assets to support social action,[30] financial pressure has changed the focus – with councils citing both cost considerations and community engagement as driving factors[31] despite the questionable compatibility of these goals.

Community Right to Challenge: Community-led public services

The Community Right to Challenge was intended to enable local groups to bid to take over local public services. Of all the Community Rights, the Right to Challenge has been the least successful, with almost no take-up across the capital – rebutting the idea that the provision of services by the state was holding back a tide of voluntary action in our neighbourhoods.

Nonetheless, there are some examples in London of a changing relationship between local communities and public services, in response to financial challenges, demographic shifts and changing expectations on the part of citizens and communities. Building on earlier rounds of smaller, discretionary participatory budgeting programmes across England, including a programme in Tower Hamlets,[32] more recent

attempts have focused on direct resident input into mainstream budgets. For example, NHS Newham Clinical Commissioning Group undertook their first participatory budgeting exercise between Winter 2018 and Spring 2019 to determine local healthcare priorities. In this instance, a community organising approach was used where local civic institutions engaged with local people and sought their views in a forum they were comfortable with. Similarly, and in the same area, Newham Council have decided their budget priorities for 2019/20 by holding a series of citizens' assemblies based in different neighbourhoods. In Lewisham, the council are increasing the allocation of the neighbourhood portion of the Community Infrastructure Levy and taking decisions on what projects to fund through local ward committees.

Others are going further. Barking and Dagenham are in the process of designing a participatory network that aims to go beyond greater citizen participation in the commissioning cycle and toward a model of "co-production" for preventative services and outcomes. They consider the role of the local authority as "facilitative". By providing open community spaces and buildings – with support for residents to collaborate on neighbourhood projects such as developing small businesses, hosting social events or developing green spaces – they aim to promote a sustainable local economy, community resilience, social connections and ultimately wellbeing.

Another area of public services which has seen developments in line with the aspirations of the Localism Act, is housing, a significant recent development has been the introduction of ballots for estate regeneration. Since July 2018, any development plans which involve the demolition of any socially rented homes must be approved by residents of that estate in a ballot if the scheme is to receive funding from City Hall. This is an important move that will place residents at the heart of decisions on their neighbourhood.

Table: Recent policy developments for neighbourhoods: a summary of take up

Initiative	Timescale	Description	Purpose	Role of the neighbourhood	Take up	Evaluation
Single Regeneration Budget (SRB)	1994 - 2001	Parties could set up "local regeneration partnership" to bid for government funding	Comprehensive regeneration of deprived areas	50 per cent of all SRB funds nationally went to neighbourhood sized areas.[i] 1 in 10 "local regeneration partnerships" were led by community or voluntary organisations.	Roughly 25 per cent of all SRB funding went to areas in London.[ii] SRB successfully targeted areas of social deprivation – 80 per cent of funding went to the top 99 most deprived districts.[iii]	Partnership working was felt to contribute additional benefits to the programme, but the opportunity for local community groups to lead and build capacity was not realised fully.[iv]
Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)	2005 - present	Business-led local partnerships	Local economic growth	Local businesses vote to establish and renew BIDs and pay a levy which raises funds to be spent locally.	London now has 63 BIDs, which represents c. 20 per cent of the total of 305 in the UK.[v] London BIDs raise annual levy income of almost £25 million and provide an additional 300 services. 1 million people are employed in BID areas.[vi]	No comprehensive evaluation to date.
New Parish Councils	2007 - present	Neighbourhood level tier of representative democracy	General purpose	Local people can petition the local authority to carry out a 'community governance review', the process to establish a new parish council. If established, the parish council can levy a precept from council tax payers within their area.	Only one parish,Queens Park council - has been established in London.	No comprehensive evaluation to date.

Initiative	Timescale	Description	Purpose	Role of the neighbourhood	Take up	Evaluation
Neighbourhood Planning	2011 - present	Community-led local planning	Community input into planning policy at the neighbourhood level	Local people and businesses given right to set neighbourhood plans to governmen local development - plans must be approved through a neighbourhood referendum.	750 adopted neighbourhood plans in the UK as of February 2019, 13 of them in London (2 per cent).[vii]	Recent analyses show that neighbourhood planning nationally can increase community buy-in to the planning process but doesn't result in increased housing supply.[viii] No central monitoring of neighbourhood plans means evaluation is difficult.
Community Right to Bid	2011 - present	Restrictions on sale of properties deemed to have a community value	Encourage community ownership of neighbourhood assets	Groups with a local connection can nominate land or buildings for listing as an 'Asset of Community Value'. If a listed 'Asset' is to be sold, the sale is paused for months so that local groups have an opportunity to buy it.	As of September 2018, 337 buildings have been listed as Assets of Community Value in London. One has been purchased by acommunity group. Nationally, estimations suggest that 90 Assets of Community Value have been purchased by community groups following listing.[ix]	Estimations based on the best available data show that the number of assets which are actually purchased by community groups is very low – 15 for every 1000 buildings listed as Assets of Community Value.[x] No central register of Assets of Community Value mean comprehensive evaluation is difficult.
Community Right to Challenge	2011 - present	Right for community groups to apply to run a local service instead of the council	Increase diversity of local service provision, and reduce costs	Parish councils and local voluntary and community organisations are empowered to apply to run a local service	Very limited take up. As of 2014, there were only 3 contracts awarded nationwide.[xi] There has been no monitoring post-2014.	Considered to have failed to empower local groups to take over local services,[xii] with calls for its replacement.

New directions for neighbourhood governance?

There is an interesting disconnect between the expressed appetite for greater community involvement and the limited impact of policy initiatives to date. One apparent theme is the challenge of navigating the processes involved in establishing new parishes or community plans. When these processes intersect with London's complex community politics, and with sometimes reluctant local authority partners, the challenges intensify. On the other hand, some councils are clearly embracing neighbourhood governance and community engagement more wholeheartedly, with innovations such as citizens' assemblies being established across the capital.

The essays that follow set out some of the lessons learned to date, before drawing together some conclusions for policy and practice.

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London government and London neighbourhoods – a long view

Tony Travers

Tony Travers traces the history of the relationship between neighbourhoods, local identities and governance in London.

London is often described as a "city of villages". This observation is true in two rather different ways. First, as the capital sprawled outwards from the City of London and later, in the 20th century, from the County of London, it embraced hundreds of towns and villages. Second, many places within Greater London still identify as villages or towns in their own right. In Croydon's case, the town's name is today a borough's. Five London commuter rail station names include the word "town" in their name. Hampstead, Highgate and Dulwich all add "village" to themselves. Neighbourhoods such as Pinner, Blackheath, Primrose Hill and even part of Walthamstow still have village identities. The UK's main airport has the name of a Middlesex hamlet, close to the villages of Harmondsworth and Sipson, within the boundaries of contemporary London.

As London sprawled outwards between the 15th and 19th centuries, parishes became the basis for a rudimentary form of local government in England. The City of London had been granted a charter of self-government by William the Conqueror in 1067, but in the urban area that evolved outside its walls, parishes and shires delivered poor relief, built highways, cleaned streets and delivered justice services. Civil parishes were an important unit of local governance until the end of the 19th century. Generally relatively small areas, they were also part of the identity of many Victorian Londoners. Some, such as St George, Hanover Square (covering parts of Mayfair, Marble Arch and

Bayswater), were rich and powerful. Smaller parishes were in some cases grouped into "district boards" to provide a more plausibly sized unit of government.

Defining "London"

Around this time, London represented an identity but not a governmental unit, except in the City. For example, the word "London" was not used in the title of either the Metropolitan Police (created in 1829) or Metropolitan Board of Works (1855). It wasn't until the creation of the London County Council (LCC) in 1889 that the governance of the city changed. The LCC's powers were greater than those of its predecessor, the Metropolitan Board of Works: it was responsible for city planning and housing as well as education.

Following the LCC's creation, the rapid expansion of "Greater London" between 1918 and 1939 engulfed mile upon mile of suburban and rural land. Places that were 10 or 15 miles from Charing Cross became, courtesy of the ever-expanding London Transport and commuter rail networks, part of a vast metropolis. Residents of genteel Northwood, Carshalton and Orpington found themselves in a single built-up area along with inner-city Paddington, Lambeth and Southwark.

Against this backdrop of unplanned expansion, it is easy to see why many Outer London areas wanted to keep their original identities. What better way of remembering a more rural and gentler past than retaining affection and civic feelings for the villages and towns that had now been surrounded by an apparently infinite city? At the same time, inner areas within the LCC's ambit often evolved their own strong sense of place. *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* and *Passport to Pimlico* attest to a romanticised idea of London neighbourhoods with their own identity and character. Despite poverty, neighbourhoods such as Bermondsey, Poplar and Stepney provoked loyalty.

The present

Today's London government consists of the Greater London Authority (Mayor and Assembly), the City of London and the 32 boroughs. While there may be particularly strong borough identities – notably in places such as Croydon, Bromley and Harrow – identity may be as or more

powerful at a neighbourhood or community level. One neighbourhood, Queen's Park in North Westminster, now has a parish council, while neighbourhood planning is increasingly creating new representative structures in a number of boroughs.

Beyond all of this, it is worth remembering that many non-geographical communities overlay those defined by areas on maps. Many football fans return to London each week from Hertfordshire, Essex, Kent, Surrey and sundry new towns to support Tottenham, Arsenal, West Ham or Crystal Palace. People born in the East End still feel loyalty to it when living years later in Southend or Billericay. Indeed, each year many thousands of London residents move to the counties surrounding the capital, creating a "London diaspora" which may, at some point in the future, generate a case for reviewing the boundaries of Greater London.

As many Inner London residents have moved to Outer London, the strength of "London-ness" has also increased. Immigrants, according to polling, generally identify strongly with London. And despite rapid demographic change, people living in London today are as likely to consider themselves "Londoners" as they were 40 years ago. Far from being the preserve of certain groups, the London identity seems widely shared across generations, social classes and ethnic groups, certainly more than British, English or European identities. It is hard to precisely measure how strong the London identity is, but recent events – notably the capital's vote in the 2016 EU referendum – suggest that London has a different approach to many issues. Such differences alone will reinforce a civic identity as compared to the rest of the UK.

No one doubts that loyalty to neighbourhoods, communities or urban "villages" can bring powerful advantages in terms of better government, social cohesion and quality of life. Any consideration of neighbourhood and locality in contemporary London should be aware of the forces that have shaped local identity in the past.

The key question is: how can we best achieve such advantages for all parts of a 1500 sq km city?

Managing growth: The role of neighbourhoods in London's planning process

Tony Burton

Tony Burton explores the contribution that neighbourhood planning can make to shaping the city.

It is eight years since the first pioneering communities exercised their rights to produce neighbourhood plans. More than half of local authorities have a completed plan – and on average, nine out of 10 voters are saying "yes" when a plan is put to referendum. This strong take-up is testimony to the energy and commitment of local volunteers. Neighbourhood plans are influencing the location and design of new housing, protecting green space and heritage, revitalising high streets and bringing people together to shape the future of their area. They have been tested on appeal and in the courts, and their influence is spreading.

London's neighbourhood planning faces some big challenges peculiar to the capital. The city has one of the most complex real estate markets in the world and a very diverse (though generally impressively cohesive) population. However, the absence of town or parish councils that would normally prepare a neighbourhood plan means neighbourhoods in London must set up a new community organisation (a neighbourhood forum) to prepare the plan instead – another barrier to entry.

Yet London is playing an important role in the growth of the neighbourhood planning movement. It is showing how communities can grapple with the complexity of development in both the West End and the suburbs. Neighbourhood plans are being prepared by areas that are less well advantaged, as well as the likes of Mayfair and Knightsbridge. They are also pioneering new planning policies on salient issues such

as air pollution, overheating and the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals.

State of neighbourhood planning in London

London is where the country's strongest neighbourhood planning network has developed, with the establishment of volunteer-led Neighbourhood Planners.London in 2016. Its 2019 *State of Neighbourhood Planning in London* report found that over 120 communities have explored neighbourhood planning, with 79 neighbourhood forums designated. 13 forums have now completed plans – and the number of plans being completed is accelerating. The success of plans at referendum is clear, and Camden tops the borough league table with four completed plans.

It is, however, taking a challenging 49 months on average for forums to take a plan from designation to referendum. A growing number of forums are becoming stuck after designation, and the number of new forums coming on stream has declined from a peak of 18 to two per year. Despite successes elsewhere in the city, nine boroughs are neighbourhood planning "deserts" with no designated neighbourhood forums – Harrow, Redbridge, Newham, City of London, Merton, Barking and Dagenham, Havering, Bromley and Croydon.

Neighbourhood planning challenges

The geography of neighbourhood planning in the capital presents a complex picture. There is no clear correlation with levels of deprivation, home ownership or borough politics. Civic-minded volunteers are using neighbourhood planning to make a real difference, but too often they face unnecessary obstacles and a lack of support from established institutions. There are lessons for the Mayor of London, London Councils, central government and the councillors and officers in London's boroughs.

There is no denying that the Mayor and most of the boroughs see neighbourhood planning as a challenge to their power and wish it away. Mayor Khan's London Plan started life believing a "two tier" planning system operated in the capital, apparently oblivious to the growth of neighbourhood plans. A survey of borough Local Plans in 2017 by Neighbourhood Planners.London showed that only five gave serious attention to neighbourhood planning. A 2016 report showed that virtually

no boroughs address the additional Community Infrastructure Levy available to areas with a neighbourhood plan. A 2018 report concluded that only one borough (Lambeth) was meeting legal requirements to set out in its Statement of Community Involvement how neighbourhood planning would be supported.

In 2018, the Commission on the Future of Localism – chaired by former Head of the Civil Service, Lord Kerslake – identified in some depth what the public see as "the blockages and frustrations for the expression of community power", including "top-down decision making" and "lack of trust and risk aversion". Neighbourhood planning is too often a case in point.

With some exceptions, neighbourhood planning volunteers report reluctance to engage with neighbourhood planning on the part of planning professionals and local councillors. In many areas there is clear evidence of minimal or misinformation being given, and in a large minority of cases there is active hostility. Planning professionals can appear threatened by lay community planners, and many councillors appear challenged by the growth of participatory democracy alongside representative democracy. This is creating strong headwinds, and in many neighbourhoods the idea of community-led planning is being snuffed out before it gets a chance to work.

Neighbourhood forums have been prevented from operating in key locations such as Elephant and Castle and Old Oak and Park Royal by boroughs amending the boundary of neighbourhood areas put forward by local communities. In other locations, boroughs have spent huge sums on developing alternative approaches which they control, such as Area Action Plans or consultant-led evidence for place policies in Local Plans. Some authorities are pushing the limits of the legal timescales within which they must make decisions on key stages of the neighbourhood planning process. Others question the representativeness of neighbourhood forums or the legitimacy of their community engagement, seemingly oblivious to the weaknesses in their own arrangements. Above all, volunteer neighbourhood planners often observe a "conspiracy of silence" from politicians and policymakers – with ever-greater emphasis placed on the importance of community engagement, yet a refusal to seize the potential of neighbourhood planning as a ready-made means to bring this to life.

Policy crunch: 10 benefits of neighbourhood planning

Despite these headwinds, neighbourhood planners are demonstrating their value to some of the most important planning issues of our time:

1. **Community consent**
   London's accommodation of eye-watering levels of housing development without spreading outwards will require the controversial transformation of many existing residential areas. Neighbourhood planning can secure the community consent on which development ultimately depends.

2. **Small sites**
   National planning policy now puts great weight on the importance of small sites for housing land supply. Neighbourhood plans such as those for Highgate and St Quintin and Woodlands demonstrate how they can identify small sites missed by boroughs and bring them forward more quickly.

3. **Protecting what's special**
   In the balance between accommodating development and respecting quality of life, neighbourhood plans can lead the way in protecting what matters most to local people – including local green spaces, community assets, heritage character and key views.

4. **Changing work patterns**
   As the demand for new and flexible working practices (such as live-work accommodation) grows, neighbourhood planning is well positioned to provide flexibility at the very local level of the individual street or small employment area. It can also respond swiftly to changing working patterns such as home working and coworking.

5. **Quality design**
   In response to the growing focus on quality design and architecture, neighbourhood planning is often more able to reflect community views and introduce design codes and policies that help create great places.

6. **Estate redevelopment**
    With growing disquiet over plans for "estate regeneration"
    and expectations of residents' ballots, neighbourhood plans
    can provide a way of achieving planned change with
    community consent.

7. **Added resources**
    With London boroughs saying they lack the resources to undertake
    the additional workloads envisaged in the London Plan – such as
    detailed area plans, Supplementary Planning Documents, design
    review, and preparation of design codes – neighbourhood forums
    can bring additional planning resources at low cost. Volunteers with
    relevant backgrounds and expertise contribute because they care
    deeply about their local neighbourhood and its future.

8. **Early involvement**
    With declining levels of community trust in local planning
    authorities and developers, neighbourhood planning can make
    a reality of public involvement at the earliest stages of new
    developments, bringing principles of community engagement,
    collaboration and co-design to life.

9. **Delivering early innovation**
    The flexibility and responsiveness of neighbourhood planning can
    support new and emergent planning policy on issues as divergent
    as air pollution, local homes, overheating and the Sustainable
    Development Goals.

10. **Addressing uncertainty**
    In an increasingly uncertain world, major infrastructure projects
    may stall or fail to attract government funding, while landowner
    decisions may change. In view of these and similar possibilities,
    there is scope to exploit the speed and responsiveness that the
    neighbourhood planning framework allows (when not obstructed).

Brexit and a real estate market currently on the turn in London are creating huge uncertainties. The new London Plan is a 400-page "Plan A" premised on optimistic assumptions. As well as helping to deliver this, neighbourhood plans can help to provide a bespoke "Plan B" for those parts of London where events do not unfold as hoped.

Neighbourhood planning is also beginning to raise questions about the lack of neighbourhood-level governance in London. As boroughs increasingly share services and merge functions, the clamour for a more local voice is growing. Following the successful establishment of Queen's Park Community Council in 2012, other communities are looking at the potential of this new form of local democracy. The process for establishing a town/parish council is made easier where a neighbourhood plan has been prepared, and so it is no surprise that some of the early interest coincides with the area of neighbourhood forums in Spitalfields and Central Ealing.

Funding and support

Research from Neighbourhood Planners.London shows that central government's support programme needs to adapt to ensure the funds and support it provides are adequate, effectively used and reaching all neighbourhoods. The ability for all neighbourhood forums to access additional funds and support should be restored. Mayoral funds (including those from development processes) should be available, as well as more peer-to-peer support. Neighbourhood planning needs to be championed by the Mayor, not least because it helps deliver Good Growth and community engagement. Aside from its contributions to planning policy, it should be valued just as much for how it brings communities together and inspires projects to improve the local quality of life as for the planning policies a neighbourhood plan contains. Local communities need more incentives to support them at different stages on the (often) long road to producing a neighbourhood plan. They also need greater influence over spending from the funds generated by the Community Infrastructure Levy on the development that follows.

Neighbourhood planning is now part of the mainstream. The time has come for planning professionals and local politicians in London, as elsewhere, to embrace its potential to improve planning for the future.

Heart of the community: Community-led approaches to protecting neighbourhood assets

Karin Woodley

Karin Woodley unpicks some of the practical challenges facing communities that want to own and manage neighbourhood assets.

In spite of its many successes, London remains a place of profound need. Our city has higher poverty rates after housing costs than the rest of the country, and those in poverty are facing deepening deprivation: children in London are more likely to miss out on everyday items than children elsewhere in England. As a result, London is the most unequal city in the country, with higher rates of wealth and income inequality than everywhere else.[1] At a time when we are increasingly concerned about the extent of inequality in our city, community spaces are as important as ever to neighbourhood empowerment and resilience.

This is nothing new. Serious need and deprivation, sitting uncomfortably alongside serious wealth, has defined the city throughout its history. There are also continuities in the way the city has responded. People have always created spaces to come together, share information and resources, build social ties, and ultimately solve their problems. Spaces that serve these functions don't follow one form, and some types have been more popular in particular eras: church halls, working men's clubs, friendly societies, libraries, cafés and community centres are all examples of places and institutions that have worked. Sociologist Eric Klinenberg has called these kinds of spaces "social infrastructure", as helping to produce the "material foundations of social life".[2] My own organisation, Cambridge House, was established as part of the University Settlement

Movement in order to tackle extreme poverty and social inequalities in
Victorian South London. 130 years later, we are still in the same place,
dealing with the same problems.

Community spaces, however, are under threat. Since 2010, local
government in London has been hit particularly hard by cuts to
funding. Total budgeted spending in the capital has fallen by 35 per
cent in real terms.[3] These cuts have seriously impacted departments
which have historically supported the kinds of places and spaces that
help underpin collective life in London. London's overheated property
market also increases the threat. For councils, the pressure to deliver
housing targets means public land becomes immensely important as a
potential development site. For private landlords, the incentive to turn
spaces which have a community function into a more lucrative use is
hard to ignore.

The very public campaigns against closures of leisure centres,
community halls and libraries across London also demonstrate the
importance of community spaces, and the value placed on them. For
lower-income Londoners, the impact of a closure can be particularly
hard. More affluent Londoners may take access to books or cultural
activities for granted, but for others they are sorely missed when the
council starts cutting back. For particularly marginalised groups such
as young people and families in crisis, disabled people, or people in
desperate housing need, the withdrawal of the state can have even
worse impacts. In addition to providing "universal" benefits to the
neighbourhood, many community spaces also host services where people
can receive targeted help and build their individual and collective
resilience. The high levels of population transience and rapid social
change in many boroughs mean that stable, established community
hubs are crucial grounding points, providing a deeply rooted sense
of attachment and belonging to a place.

Protecting spaces: handing control to the community

Naturally, communities and local authorities have looked for ways to
protect these kinds of spaces. One of these has involved the transfer of
local neighbourhood assets to community control. In some ways this is an
attempt to replicate certain features belonging to past eras of mutual aid

and collective action, rather than being a wholly "new" approach.

The vision of community empowerment through local assets has been supported by politicians of all parties in recent years. The last Labour government undertook a thorough review which aimed to encourage the transfer of public buildings to community control in order to support social wellbeing.[4] The idea was that local assets could help provide a steady source of income, as well as improving local capacity and building confidence.

Similarly, the coalition government of 2010-15 made supporting local civic action a significant feature of their vision for society,[5] although with less focus on local economic development and capitalising deprived communities. Amongst local authorities now, there is evidence that transferring community assets into community ownership is seen as a way to support "co-production", i.e. the involvement of people in designing and delivering the services they use[6] – as well as safeguarding a locally valued space. Hence, there are a lot of good intentions behind the desire to support community ownership of neighbourhood assets.

A growing phenomenon

Community asset ownership is growing: based on the available data it is estimated there are around 6,325 such assets (defined broadly as "land and buildings with long-term ownership rights and control by local communities, to provide benefit for local people")[7] in England. Due to the lack of a central registry, it is impossible to say precisely how many are in London. Of those we do know about in England, almost a third came into community ownership in the last decade.[8] As well as fulfilling a vital social function and providing a mechanism to safeguard services, recent assessments based on the available data demonstrate that 56p out of every £1 spent by community-owned assets stays local.[9] Similarly, where community-owned assets are able to hire people, they are overwhelmingly likely to come from the local area.[10] But there are also some serious financial challenges to face.

Financial challenges

The aspiration for asset ownership to act as a financial lever for community groups and organisations is a good one in theory. The idea is

that once community groups are in possession of an asset, the space can be used for revenue-generating activities, providing a return which can support local wealth creation and activities with a community benefit. Existing building-based community "anchor" organisations are potentially well placed to take advantage: having an asset to draw on should mean that those who already provide services through a neighbourhood centre can develop and grow. In reality, however, the long-term sustainability of financial models, asset development and renewal plans, facilities management arrangements and marketing strategies are rarely given the necessary attention.

To make a sustainable difference, community assets often need more investment in building infrastructure and services upfront, so that planned maintenance and service costs are as low as possible, future-proofed and environmentally friendly. I have managed community assets that have been developed on the basis of service user numbers the drains could not accommodate and been painted in bespoke colours that were too expensive to maintain.

As such, while neighbourhood assets are increasingly coming into community ownership, there aresignificant financial vulnerabilities. 75 per cent of total assets in community ownership report they are in good financial health,[11] but up to 20 per cent report that they do not have sufficient reserves to deal with an unexpected modest expense or an income shock. Similarly, 30 per cent felt that they did not have their debts under control. When we look to a more detailed level, we can see that in deprived neighbourhoods, the proportion of assets in good financial health is much lower at around 50 per cent.

The financial benefits of community asset ownership are promised on the basis that the asset can serve as just that – an asset. But without adequate support and resources, there is a danger that community organisations could be set up to fail. Asset transfer becomes liability transfer instead. The risks of this are highlighted by the evidence – just under 50 per cent of assets in community ownership reported the cost of maintenance as having an impact on financial health. Despite the best intentions of landlords, handing over buildings in poor condition could create an unsustainable burden for community organisations. The risks of this are heightened when we consider the wider funding landscape.

Delivering bottom-up change

Cutbacks in public funding over recent years have meant not only reductions in revenue spend on services, but also fewer available capital grants to cover the kinds of maintenance issues asset ownership creates. Social investment – i.e. providing finance through loans to be repaid with interest or equity – has increasingly been turned to in order to fill the gap.

While loans can play a part in capitalising community groups, they need repayment and are still a commercial product. This commercial reality can result in risk-averse lenders not supporting projects which don't align with their ideas or funding requirements,[12] limiting the potential for community groups to deliver real, bottom-up change. For marginalised groups in London, who can find experiences of mainstream public services and institutions alienating and even discriminatory,[13] this represents a huge missed opportunity to provide appropriate and much-needed support. When projects are designed to meet funder imperatives, rather than being designed with and for local communities and their intended beneficiaries, we have to ask: how much, if any, "empowerment" is involved? Genuine co-production can only take place when there is a realisation that it can't be imposed top-down – either explicitly or implicitly through overly stringent or prescriptive funding and procedural requirements.

This is as true for local authorities as it is for social investors. Transferring a local asset to community control on the basis of meeting particular siloed service needs identified by professional commissioners can run the risk of missing the bigger picture. Having genuine community involvement in the entire process, rather than just at the "delivery" end, means the potential for real transfer of power is much higher.[14] Without making the most of the unique strengths of community leadership – deep local understanding and reach, lived expertise and emotional investment – attempts to just build a "community hub" without real participation will miss the mark.

A top-down approach can even threaten the survival of existing community-led hubs, as resources are used to support new asset transfers without regard to an existing neighbourhood ecosystem. In some cases, planning gain is used to encourage private sector investment for new community spaces in areas well served by existing hubs. This runs the

risk of disempowering local people and creating a financially unviable environment for both existing and new spaces.

What lessons can be learned?

There are two principal issues to address – financial and cultural.

The desire to support community asset ownership must be matched with the resources to enable a genuine transfer of power. This will vary in different situations and could involve, for example, making sure that buildings handed over to communities don't come with hefty maintenance responsibilities attached – or equally, providing alternative, sustainable sources of grant funding and capital reserves.

Related to this are the attitudes and power relations which underpin the relationship between community groups and local authorities. Transferring assets to community control should be seen in the broader context as a method of transferring power, rather than just management responsibilities. In order for this to be successful, the tendency for those with power to hoard it has to be challenged. When asset transfers or funding are made overly contingent on meeting the demands of those who hold the purse strings, it runs the risk of not challenging these basic imbalances of power, but replicating them instead. In order for the real potential of community asset ownership to be realised, local authorities will have to learn to let go of the reins a bit, and allow communities to take the lead in the ways that those of us who work with them – and in them – know they can.

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Connected communities: Technology, voice and governance in London neighbourhoods

Indy Johar

Indy Johar imagines how neighbourhoods can become a key site in harnessing technological developments for social good.

Today humanity faces many serious challenges – climate change, rising wealth inequality, runaway technological innovation, growing populist sentiment and nationalism to name but a few. These technological, societal and environmental crises of our time are entangled in our here and now. And the trajectories of these interlinked risks – from species extinction to digital monopolies and mass manipulation – are being intensified rather than limited or mitigated by our existing governance models.

In the face of these challenges, we urgently need to redefine our relationship to the future – and governance innovation is perhaps the most urgent priority if we as a species are to redefine our collective viability. Governance and regulation is one of the most important roles of the state – the means with which we structurally cohabit the present and define the future. It is the codified relationship between market, state, and civil society, ensuring adequate protections and terrains of action for each.

Yet around the world, much of the discourse around regulatory innovation is focused on reducing the "regulatory burden" for corporations and "cutting red tape" – a trickle-down theory that views corporate profit as the key to bolstering broad economic growth. But the challenge is deeper than rethinking neoliberal economics: governments

are increasingly unable to exert control over contemporary corporations
and technologies at all. The challenge is to rebuild the social and technical
capacities of the state – not against, but with and across public and civil
society sectors.

New models

Part of the challenge is to change a regulatory approach in which ex
ante permissions are given based on centralised prediction, rather than
decentralised iteration. Such predictions don't account for the adaptive
nature of our innovation age, where uncertainty is co-produced across
corporates, governments and civil society. Too often, our established
institutions aren't even acknowledging the interlinked nature of these
risks, let alone creating strategies that tackle them meaningfully. We
need to build our collective capacity to respond systematically to the
threats society faces in a real-time basis.

The urgency of the societal and environmental risks we face is fuelling
a decline in the "softer" elements that underpin our governance system
– trust in institutions, imagination of better futures – just when we need
them the most. This in turn is driving and exacerbating a diminished
capacity to build legitimacy around bold, systemic interventions.

Whilst the impact of these factors is increasingly felt and understood
at the scale of our cities and neighbourhoods, we lack the capacity
to act, cooperate and innovate at the scale on which we live – in our
here-and-now. We therefore need to find new models for exploring
issues, discovering solution pathways, and making decisions together.
We must embrace the reality of a complex, volatile and emergent world
by building capacity for simultaneous regulatory and technological
innovation. To keep up with the pace of change we also need to transition
towards a collaborative and agile model of designing, delivering and
updating the rules. This collaborative model must be public, private
and fundamentally civic.

At the same time, new technologies such as big data, machine-
learning insights, digital registries, automated administration, and
parametric legislation are paving the way for new governance models
that learn from real-time feedback. Ultimately, these new technologies
can help unlock a transition from centralised governance to a distributed

model operating at the neighbourhood level. But we must also avoid the possible negative effects of these technologies, exploring their potential value without undermining the foundations of legitimacy that underpin the public sector's ability to lead collective action. A new collaborative and agile governance model must be guided by legitimate means for identifying and advancing the public good.

This future requires two strategic shifts in direction.

1. **Recognise that cities and neighbourhoods are where society's challenges and possibilities become personal.**
   Cities and town centres are where formal government becomes personal – where individuals have the greatest capacity to be civically engaged, and where they most feel the outcomes of engagement. But local governments are generally caught between political agency and citizen accountability – a position that both motivates and constrains innovation. This means that they often lack the legal jurisdiction to work effectively with innovative technologies, yet bear accountability to residents. As a member of Boston City Hall noted recently: if a tragedy happens with self-driving cars, residents will say "Why did the Mayor let these drive on our roads?" – and responding with "the test is happening in accordance with a state-level ordinance" will not be a good enough answer.

   Yet local governments are often ahead of national governments in taking responsibility and action. For example, a number of Canadian cities have responded to global climate change by declaring a Climate Emergency (Ottawa, Montreal, Kingston and Vancouver); while in the neighbouring United States, New York has adopted a Green New Deal and other cities are following suit. Perhaps this ability and willingness to act explains why city governments are often more trusted than regional or national ones.

   The ability and determinedness of cities and local authorities to address national and international challenges is recognised and supported by a growing community of strategic innovators around the world. The United Nations Development Programme

in Eurasia has recently launched the new City Experiments Fund
with the new emerging work by EIT Climate-KIC on full city
transitions, but one could also cite the 100 Resilient Cities
programme powered by Rockefeller, Bloomberg Philanthropies'
work, and the seeding of Future Cities Canada by the McConnell
Foundation. There are also a growing number of platforms
and networks such as Participatory City, Fab City Global, and
PlacemakingX that demonstrate the transformative potential
of neighbourhood/urban village scale transition – marrying the
power of cities with the legitimacy of the neighbourhood (urban
parish/town hall).

With cities accounting for up to 80 per cent of global growth,
the potential for impact is huge. But for cities to succeed at place-
based governance, we need to devolve capacity for innovation
while building neighbourhood-scale infrastructure of legitimacy
and participation.

2. **Build the capacity for regulatory experimentation at the
   neighbourhood scale.**
   Civic activists, social entrepreneurs and civic innovators are
   exploring new governance models, but more needs to be done to
   support these experiments and consolidate what is learned from
   the results. Regulatory Experimentation (RegX) could provide
   strategies for doing this, enabling cities and neighbourhoods to
   move beyond centralised, brittle, homogenous rules and norms –
   instead embracing the richness and dynamism of individual and
   contextually emergent conditions and civic leadership.

   Regulatory Experimentation will demand institutional
   infrastructure (civic data pools, digitalised registries), innovation
   capacity (identifying new models), experimentation capacity
   (testing new models), synthesis capacity (collecting evidence and
   synthesising it collaboratively across experiments), and legitimacy
   (participatory engagement). It also requires a longer timescale:
   many effects will only be seen, tested, retested, and understood
   over 5-10 years – that is, longer than traditional political cycles.

Regulatory Experimentation will be a process of simultaneously building new modes of practice and creating the conditions for their long-term legitimacy. These new civic, neighbourhood-scale institutions are vital in order to help us identify and act on strategic opportunities for regulatory experimentation.

RegX is a critical step towards system-scale regulatory innovation. Developing this degree of technical capacity while maintaining legitimacy requires dedicated hybrid and massively participatory institutions.

What it means for London

With the right support and capacity building, it is neighbourhoods, towns and cities that can lead the charge in a progressive transition.

The way forward cannot be dictated by the Mayor's office. It lies with our civic capacity to build decentralised infrastructure for radical innovation. Reimagining how we choose to live together will need to happen from the neighbourhood level upward.

London's historic town halls could be a critical location in helping achieve this. They are places where trust can flourish through legitimate participation and civic leadership. They present the viable locations for the construction of progressive self-governance, and should be empowered for radical governance innovation. They could be at the forefront of a movement of neighbourhood-scale governance: massively participatory, legitimate, and charting our transition.

London's governance needs to be reconstituted around a participatory scale at the level of village parishes and town halls, from Acton and Ealing to Hanwell and Hammersmith. At the same time, economies of scale must be simultaneously aggregated at the level of the Greater London Authority – and structural governance innovation capacity radically expanded – if we are to transition London at the speed and scale needed.

Business engagement: BIDs, town centre forums and beyond

Ruth Duston OBE, OC and Ben Rogers

Ruth Duston and Ben Rogers explore the growing contribution that Business Improvement Districts are making to the economic and civic life of the city.

Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) represent one of the more notable developments in local governance in recent years. Essentially, a BID is an area-based business-led body, created through a ballot process, with the power to raise a modest precept on business rates to fund improvements to the local area. UK BIDs are required to renew their mandate through a ballot of their funders every five years. BIDs are funded primarily through their levy, but can also draw on other public and private funding streams.

Based on US models, BIDs were introduced to the UK in 2004. There are now 300 across the country and 63 in London. The BID model has proven attractive across geographies and political makeup, with take-up across inner and outer London boroughs and under Labour and Conservative administrations. The rate of adoption has been impressive, doubling between 2011-2016.

The legislation that governs BIDs is not prescriptive about size or focus, and they have proved remarkably adaptive. Originally designed with high streets and town centres in mind, we have seen the emergence of a variety of models: city centre BIDs covering world-renowned tourist attractions where the occupiers pay the levy, property-owner BIDs in prime retail zones where the landlord pays the levy, micro-BIDs covering small high streets with no paid staff, and more recently even industrial

estate BIDs. The levy income in London ranges from just £20,000 p.a. to c. £7.5 million p.a. for the New West End Company.

A growing role

London BIDs have grown in ambition and importance. When first launched, most focused on a "clean, green and safe" agenda, paying for more street cleaning, planting flowers and funding local anti-crime initiatives. However, as they have matured, they have taken on a more strategic, place-shaping role, developing, championing and sponsoring major transport and public realm improvements. Some major public realm improvement projects would have been unlikely to happen without the catalysing influence of BIDs. For example, the Northbank BID led moves to dismantle the one-way system running around Bush House at Aldwych and create a new piazza at Somerset House: the project has now been taken on and driven by the local authority. This demonstrates the leadership role BIDs can take.

Elsewhere, the New West End Company has been an important force in the campaign to pedestrianise Oxford Street; Better Bankside has led on opening up street-level access to old railway viaducts, creating new commercial space and greater pedestrianisation of the area; and Camden Town Unlimited has developed detailed proposals for a "Camden Highline" (inspired by the New York Highline) to create new public space out of a defunct railway. Again and again we see BIDs commissioning urban planners to develop proposals for their areas, getting interested parties round the table, brokering deals and securing investment – often in innovative ways.

While BID income has generally been fairly modest, property-owning BIDs in central London have the potential to generate significant additional revenue for investment. As essentially private funding for public projects, the BID levy is extremely valuable and can be leveraged to unlock other funding sources.

Holding a ballot followed by five years of secure income is what sets BIDs apart from other civic neighbourhood organisations. This funding means they don't have to rely on voluntary resources or grants for their core costs: instead, they can focus on delivery until the next ballot. As part of the setup process, BIDs and local authorities have to agree that

all services provided by the BID will be additional to what the local authority already provides, guaranteeing they won't replace core local government functions.

Finally, the ballot allows BIDs to "fail clean": if a BID loses the support of its electorate, there is a definitive end point and wind-up rather than slow atrophy.

Reservations

Despite these advantages, some wariness of BIDs remains. This seems to originate from a worry that BIDs could represent the intrusion of business interests into local democracy. Others are appreciative of the benefits that BIDs can bring, but would prefer to see business interests represented in a more streamlined governance structure with both residents and businesses covered.

We think BIDs have a legitimate and valuable role to play, representing important city interests and helping galvanise and co-ordinate local initiative. In some ways, the name is not helpful: lots of BID members and levy payers are not businesses but rather public and not-for-profit organisations. Whitehall Departments feature heavily in the Victoria Westminster BID. King's College London and the London School of Economics and Political Science have been leading players in the Northbank BID. The Euston Town BID is chaired by a representative of University College London Hospital. Perhaps they are better thought of as "BEIDs" – Business and Employer Improvement Districts – or "CIDS": Community Improvement Districts.

Of course, businesses and employers do have a legitimate interest in their areas of operation – they represent their employees and customers as well as tourists, students and anyone else who uses an area yet is not a resident of it. BIDs arguably play a particularly important role in London precisely because it is a city of business – especially in central London and the many town centres where workers and visitors far outnumber residents. The latest numbers suggest that there are three times as many workers as residents in Westminster. They also have a real interest in the improvement of the areas where they operate.

Working with communities

As BIDs have developed and matured, they have come to work more closely with community organisations, voluntary groups and civic societies. Victoria BID is supporting the Victoria Neighbourhood Planning Forum, looking after Community Infrastructure Levy funds on their behalf; Better Bankside operate a
small grants programme for local community organisations. Some BIDs, in fact, have a strongly civic character. Simon Brooksbank, co-founder of Planning Out, an LGBT+ planners network, is leading a move to establish a Soho BID with the aim of preserving Soho's long history as a centre of gay culture.

Meanwhile, the Camden Town BID (Camden Town Unlimited) has set up a hub to support local startups and, working with the Euston BID and others, has also launched Alternative Camden – "a new type of local institution that helps us all create a radically more democratic, sustainable and equal future". This new institution will support civic innovation in areas like data privacy, carbon emissions, skills and employment. We are big fans of London's boroughs, but it's not easy to imagine them coming up with innovations like this in the absence of a BID, as the BID has alternative routes and mechanisms of engagement beyond the traditional local authority.

Another valuable feature of BIDs, and neighbourhood institutions more generally, is their ability to work across established administrative borders. It's almost an iron law of government that municipalities pay more attention to the centre of their districts than the peripheries, in part because improvements to a periphery tend to benefit fewer voters than improvements to the centre. For instance, it's striking how many of London's "opportunity areas" – that is, areas that would benefit from major investment – straddle borough boundaries. But BIDs can be configured to cross administrative boundaries, knitting an area together and securing much-needed investment for it. Aldgate is just one example: on the border between Tower Hamlets and the City of London, the area has a rich history and an impressive mix of businesses, universities, charities and cultural institutions, but is trisected by three arterial roads and has long felt a bit neglected. The new Aldgate business partnership, that will be balloting local businesses in the new year to become a BID,

is beginning to change that by advocating for transport and public realm improvements, promoting the visitor economy and helping local people with work and skills.

Of course, BIDs vary in the extent of their ambitions and the quality of their partnerships. There is definitely scope for more of them to engage constructively with local community groups and civic organisations. But it would seem a big mistake to turn our back on the enterprising, can-do, collaborative spirit that characterises the best London BIDs – especially as the balance of power remains very much in favour of local, regional and national government. Neighbourhood initiative needs all the support it can get.

What's next for BIDs?

For the future, two priorities stand out. First, we need to revisit some of the legislation, especially around BID setup. Creating BIDs is a long and adminstratively heavy process. Lengthy notification periods and often a skeleton resource due to funding limitations, makes the establishment of a BID more challenging to deliver on. Outdated and resource-intensive burdens are placed on the local authority and BID proposers, and could be streamlined significantly.

We also need to consider whether there is some way of strengthening BIDs' role in local decision making. Currently, boroughs, mayoral and national government agencies, utilities and others have no obligation to work with BIDs. While uncommon, we have seen cases of public sector organisations pursuing schemes that have a major impact on a BID area without engaging the relevant BIDs. Likewise, some BIDs complain of the difficulty of getting boroughs and similar organisations round the table. Could we establish a legal duty on the part of neighbourhood stakeholders to cooperate?

Beyond this, there are interesting and difficult questions about how BIDs should relate to neighbourhood forums, ward councillors and other neighbourhood-level authorities and initiatives. Any move to establish a neighbourhood forum in an area with many businesses has to win backing in both a residential and a business ballot. But there is no similar obligation on BIDs to win the backing of residents in heavily residential areas. Should there be?

Parishes have been slow to take off in London, perhaps in part because we already have two levels of permanent, formal sub-national government – the Mayor and the boroughs. But could a residential version of a BID – a pop-up parish with specific areas of focus that had to seek a renewal of its mandate every five years – be a way forward on neighbourhood governance? And if so, how would these pop-ups relate to BIDs? Could we experiment with a hybrid resi-business BID – a CID (Community Improvement District), or NID (Neighbourhood Improvement District)? Or could we find ways of encouraging BIDs and residential-led counterparts to work together somehow?

From a certain point of view, BIDs are representatives of businesses, and as such have most in common with business membership organisations like, for example, a local chamber of commerce. But as this essay has tried to suggest, they might be understood more plausibly as a form of neighbourhood governance. They have already achieved a great deal. The question should not be "How can we constrain them?" – as it perhaps still is in some purist circles. Rather, we should be asking how we can support them to do what they do well – as well as how to harness their enterprising spirit, deepen their civic connections and learn from them in strengthening neighbourhood capital.

Resident voice: The role of tenants in running affordable housing

Pat Turnbull

Pat Turnbull makes the case for tenants to be given a greater say in running their own housing - and how to do it.

In the two years since the Grenfell Tower fire killed 72 people, there have been many discussions about how to ensure the voices of social housing tenants are heard. On this occasion, I'd like to flip that question and ask: how do we get landlords and our government (at all levels – local to national) to better listen to tenants?

That's a question that should be on the minds not just of tenants but of housing managers, community engagement workers, councillors, MPs, local journalists and others who could make a difference.

It's worth first reminding ourselves why it is important to seek out and listen to the views of tenants. In the wake of Grenfell, this might feel obvious – but with 14 families still living in temporary accommodation two years on, it's clear that at least some in social housing could do with a recap.

First, tenants and leaseholders know what is happening in our homes and neighbourhoods better than anyone else. This is all the more so in London, a city of increasing transience, in which social housing tenants and residents still form the most stable of communities.

Second, and too often forgotten: we pay the wages. Our landlords exist to serve their tenants and should therefore be keen to know what we think of their service. Working against this is a persistent myth that social housing tenants are getting something for nothing, and should be grateful for whatever we get regardless of quality.

Third, there is little choice for those living in social housing, particularly in London where some 78 per cent of the housing need backlog is for social rented homes. If we have fire safety concerns, our choice is between staying put and campaigning or moving into poor-quality private lets, risking homelessness if we can't keep up the rent. This means that social housing tenants rarely "vote with their feet" and leave if there is a problem with their landlord or the building, even a serious one.

Consumer-style approaches to hearing from tenants (think "focus groups" and "mystery shoppers") are increasingly popular among housing associations and councils alike, but are of limited use when it comes to curbing institutional complacency where it exists. Participants in these initiatives are often self-selecting or selected by the landlord. If they raise unwelcome concerns, their views can be easily dismissed as those of just one tenant.

The best landlords have an active ear close to the ground, taking complaints seriously and prioritising putting things right. How can we make sure that all landlords follow their example? And how do we ensure that tenants are listened to by local, regional and national government as well?

As we see it, there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Here are five mechanisms that already exist which landlords and government workers could make better use of to ensure they are listening to tenants:

1. **Tenants and Residents Associations (TRAs):** When it comes to dealing with their landlords, social housing tenants amplify their voices by forming local TRAs: it is harder to dismiss what's said by a committee elected by their neighbours at an open annual meeting. For housing managers, this can be a mutually beneficial relationship: TRA committees are an accountable ear on the ground and worth their weight in gold, especially for those having to split their time across various estates. Some councils and housing associations provide resources and grants to support their TRAs. This should become standard practice: councils and housing associations should be required to set aside a proportion of tenants' rents to provide TRAs with grants to help cover running costs.

2. **The Right to Manage and the Right to Transfer:** These are two little-known rights that give council tenants the ability to take matters into their own hands when things are going awry with their landlord. Subject to various safeguards and a ballot, the former allows tenants to jointly take on the management of their estates by forming a Tenant Management Organisation (TMO); the latter pushes this further by allowing tenants to form a community-led housing association or Community Land Trust (CLT) to take full ownership of their homes. TMOs, CLTs and housing co-ops are all resident-run membership organisations, democratically accountable through annual elections.

    Unlike KCTMO (the management organisation responsible for Grenfell Tower), most TMOs are small-scale, managing several hundred properties or less, with an estate-based housing office. Godwin and Crowndale Tenant Management Co-operative in Camden manages just 173 flats across two neighbouring blocks. It was formed in 1992 by residents who were at their wits' end about entrenched antisocial behaviour problems. Now – 27 years on – the TMC and the community are thriving, with the resident-run board able to respond quickly and effectively when problems do arise. In Bermondsey, tenants on the board of Leathermarket Joint Management Board (JMB) led the development of 27 new council homes on a former garage site on the Kipling Estate.

    When in charge of the budget and other decisions, tenants can ensure that their needs are put first. Taking ownership can also help protect residents from imprudent demolition, or loss of community areas and green spaces to profit-making ventures (West Kensington & Gibbs Green Community Homes are a great example of tenants campaigning for this). We'd like to see both rights extended to housing associations to ensure all social housing tenants have this option. Of course, social landlords can prevent matters getting to that stage by working in a serious and collaborative manner with their TRAs.

3. **Ballots and full community involvement in regeneration and large-scale development areas:** Living on public land, social housing tenants and leaseholders are disproportionately vulnerable to losing their homes and green spaces in regeneration schemes, as councils and housing associations seek to plug holes in their budgets or meet housing delivery targets. Yet lower-income households are typically the least likely to be involved in the decision-making process.

   At London Tenant Federation (LTF), we believe that estate regeneration should be resident-led and demolition should be a last resort. We've had some success in calling for the introduction of ballots to protect tenants from the worst demolition schemes, though we believe the Mayor of London could still do more to protect the unnecessary demolition of valuable, existing social rented homes.

   Furthermore, tenant representatives could be involved a lot more in the development of borough-wide planning and housing policy, and in scrutinising planning applications. LTF has recently done grant-funded work creating networks of tenants and other community groups to influence large-scale developments in London, including the Grand Union Alliance in the Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation area. However, we feel this could become more standard practice if the boroughs supported it and the Mayor drew up a Statement of Community Involvement for his Opportunity Areas.

4. **The Local Authority Committee System:** While abolished under Labour, the Localism Act gave councils the freedom to revive the system in 2012. This could bring more people (including tenants) into debates around and scrutiny of decision making. The Committee System allows councils to delegate decision making on certain areas (e.g. housing or planning) to committees or sub-committees comprised of elected councillors. Rather than decisions being made behind closed doors by a cabinet or an elected Mayor, this opens the process up to greater accountability and scrutiny. We challenge more councils to take up this opportunity and – as

often occurred in the past – to extend invitations to local elected tenant representatives who could speak up for social housing in their borough.

5. **Tenants' Federations:** These are forums that bring together elected tenant reps of individual social landlords to share information and collectively hold their landlord to account. Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations, one of few federations in London to be funded by their council, runs successful tenant-led campaigns whilst also providing training, legal advice and other resources to TRAs in Southwark. Tenant federations and organisations make up the membership of London Tenants Federation. Together we ensure that tenants' local and grassroots perspectives are taken into account in London-wide planning policy and decision making, most recently feeding into the draft new London Plan.

   As with TRAs, we'd like to see more landlords set aside funds to support the running of tenants' federations. Bodies such as these and our own London-wide federation are more able to actively engage with the wider voluntary and community sector. Recently, this has enabled us to successfully campaign for the GLA to set up a Housing Panel that brings together voluntary and community sector organisations (including ours) to feed into the Mayor's housing policy.

   More could be done. There has been much discussion of a national body to represent tenants. Tenants' federations, fed by a thriving network of local TRAs, TMOs and co-ops, could provide the strong foundations and grassroots accountability that would give such a body the legitimacy it needs to succeed.

Uncomfortable neighbours: Co-production in practice

Joe Wills, Centre for London interviews Casey Howard of the People's Empowerment Alliance for Custom House (PEACH).

Casey Howard is a local resident of Custom House in the London Borough of Newham, and works part-time as a community organiser for PEACH, the People's Empowerment Alliance for Custom House. PEACH was founded in 2013 as part of Big Local, a funding programme that awarded £1 million to Custom House "on the basis that it can be spent over 10-15 years at the community's own chosen pace, and on their own plans and priorities."

The experience of PEACH is a case study in what can happen if communities are trusted with resources to deliver change as they see fit. One of their key priorities was for local people to have a greater influence on the regeneration of their neighbourhood, in tandem with the local authority. The idea behind this was a genuine transfer of power to the neighbourhood level. We spoke with Casey to find out how this played out.

Joe: Tell me about what PEACH does and how you worked with the local community to determine the organisation's priorities around regeneration.

Casey: PEACH carried out a listening campaign at the outset – a group of residents got together to find out what mattered to the community. This listening campaign involved door knocking in the area and holding open public meetings, information workshops and one-to-one meetings between organisers and residents in their homes. A big priority from that exercise was housing and regeneration. Custom House is sandwiched

between the A13 and the DLR: on the other side of the tracks is the ExCeL and the new developments going up next to the river. There is a massive contrast between the poverty on this side and the hugely expensive flats and hotels on the other side.

Custom House had been proposed as a regeneration area for over 15 years, with a masterplan drawn up in 2004 and revised in 2007 but since left unchanged. The regeneration area comprises 550 homes, a GP surgery and a high street of 15 commercial units. The council's plan proposed quadrupling the density to up to 2000 homes. In the meantime, there was no information given to residents, and a lot of uncertainty and worry. Residents had witnessed other nearby regeneration schemes take place which the community had no control over and didn't want to let the same thing happen to them. Because the area was proposed for regeneration, it was pretty much left to decay. Residents were left in limbo, with no investment in the meantime. Local shops were in bad repair, with a lot of vacant units on the high street, meaning crime was a problem.

PEACH decided early on that coming up with an alternative plan for the regeneration of our area would be the best use of our time. As the stalled regeneration was having an impact on the area, we wanted take some control over our own future, rather than sitting there and waiting for something to happen to us. So we set out to develop an alternative plan to present to the council.

Joe: Can you explain to me how the process of engaging the community and developing the alternative regen plan with them worked?
Casey: Some of the Big Local money was used to employ 10 community organisers – five of whom were local residents, and four professional advisers (individual architects who were then also trained in organising).

The first stage was to meet the community. Over one year, this involved knocking on thousands of doors and meeting hundreds of local residents face to face. The process of designing the plan collaboratively with the community was about constant learning. We ran workshops to deal with every aspect of the alternative plan, but they weren't just to pass on information; they were to teach people about the nuts and

bolts of development. For example, we spoke about the pros and cons of the traditional development model – where you don't need the money up front, as the developer can provide it, so there's a lower risk for the council. What are the negatives? Amongst other things, the developer needs their 20 per cent profit, so there might be more market housing to make it up.

We focused on teaching these ideas so that residents understood what the real ins and outs of the politics of regeneration are, and how it would affect them. To a certain extent, it helped us understand that on some things we'll have to compromise. For example, we played an interactive "priority bingo" where people had to stand on a square which represents a particular priority from a range of provided potential outcomes. Then the exercise was about choosing between priorities – so for example if you wanted to have your preferred option selected, you would have to persuade a certain number of other people to join you from their preferred option. The convincing, compromise and consensus building was a central part of the process.

During the organising process there was a big skills exchange between the resident organisers and the architects, as we all participated in the engagement activities. We taught them about how to engage with the residents, and they taught us about architecture and planning. When we ran workshops with the community on how the regen could bring jobs, or how houses and public spaces could be designed, they were designed collaboratively with both the architects and the resident organisers. This included jargon busting (we'd stand up and shout out "jargon!" any time they used it!) so people could understand the language, and presenting plans with materials and tools people could understand (e.g. cardboard boxes and models rather than architectural drawing). What came out of that was really great, detailed plans, which achieved the same level of density that the council were proposing.. The community – who had previously been not considered an equal partner – had been able to say "Look what we've done! We have detailed drawings and a viability assessment done by the same people who worked on the London Plan, while in 15 years you've done nothing here!" I think it became hard to ignore the work we'd done by that point.

Joe: What were some of the challenges you faced in setting up the alternative regen plan, and how did you overcome them?

Casey: Initially there was some wariness and suspicion, when people thought we were from the council. Once people realised that our kids probably went to the same school, that I live round the corner, and the same thing that you care about, I care about too, that helped break down the trust barrier. We were there, making a plan with them, as part of it. We were there saying "this is my community too, I feel the same as you, and I want to do something about it. Would you like to do something about it too?"

The second barrier was a lack of hope and confidence – why would the council listen to us? Why would it ever be any different? What do we know? There was a lack of recognition of their own abilities and the validity of their own experiences. I believe that this came from years of neglect, not only in the area, but in the community itself. The high transience, the sense of not knowing who your neighbours are, the high street being dead, the lack of connection and stopping to chat. It was like a scurry of people getting off the train or bus and getting home as quickly as possible, as it's not a place you want to be hanging about. There was a real challenge. However, the whole process of community involvement, learning and engagement has given members of the community the belief that their voice is worth listening to, confidence to say what they think and not have to apologise for that, and an understanding that they have relevant expertise.

What we did was support the community to become informed, but also create an alternative. This changed the lack of hope I mentioned into an ability to hope, plan and create a regeneration that included them. This was genuinely empowering, creating a springboard for people to have other aspirations and question their own place in society. People realised that they can have power over their environment and their own lives. The other thing it did was get people to realise that they weren't living in isolation, and that it wasn't just happening to them. When people are struggling day to day, they can feel like they are just fighting for survival by themselves, and that they alone are responsible for their position in society. But actually, once people turned up to meetings and started talking to each other, people realised that their neighbours were

in the same position. Even where people might have looked different, or felt like they had nothing else in common, they realised that their fears were the same. Through building relationships, we were creating shared support for each other, creating shared aspirations, identifying shared interests, and actually becoming more powerful.

Joe: People often say that community organisations can be unrepresentative or made up of the "usual suspects". How does PEACH ensure that the wider community is involved?
Casey: There is a steering group that directs PEACH, made up of residents and local business owners. We take direction and feedback to them, and they write the yearly direction and budget. We are accountable to the steering group.

What guarantees PEACH being open is that anyone can join. And by that we don't just mean "in theory" – we do outreach work and actively invite people. My main role is to build relationships with people, across the entire neighbourhood. I tell people about PEACH and what we do, and try and get them to attend. There is continual engagement and recruitment of new people.

As well as the initial door knocking contact, leafletting and phone calls, each week I do on average five to eight individual one-to-one sessions with people who are either existing or potential members. These are 45 minutes at a time, in people's own homes. The aim is for at least two of these to be new people each week. The rest is keeping existing members engaged and supported.

We also knock on doors at different times to get people who don't work typical office hours. That includes evenings and weekends. We can meet in residents' homes or local spaces. Most of my contacts come from door knocking or just being around and living in the local area. I can go to the shop to buy some milk and hear someone talking about something they're pissed off about – that's a way into letting them know about PEACH. We get a lot of residents coming who are brought in by other residents, and we really push for this. It's part of our whole approach of encouraging people to support and advocate for themselves and each other. For example, if we know a resident speaks

one language, often they'll bring along someone else who speaks the same language and translate for them.

The formal platform for taking decisions is our housing club each month. Anyone can join PEACH housing club and become a member, which costs £1 – a nominal fee to show commitment. Every single member in the housing club has a vote, but you can still attend the meeting without being a member. All the big decisions we take, such as whether to agree with different elements of the masterplan, are voted on. But importantly, they are voted on after a lot of deliberation, discussion and clarification, after holding drop-ins at different times of the day and actively contacting people to contribute.

Where we have had meetings with senior officers or politicians at the council, residents lead on that, and are supported intensively in the run-up so that they can be confident in negotiating and speaking in that kind of a setting.

Joe: What has your relationship been like with the local authority throughout the process?

Casey: The current Mayor, Rokhsana Fiaz, was actually the ward councillor for Custom House originally, so we knew her well. She supported a lot of the campaign work we were doing around conditions for temporary tenants in the area. When she got elected, things were very promising. The stalled Custom House regeneration was going to be restarted, by creating a new masterplan. Although our alternative masterplan wouldn't be adopted, it was agreed that residents would be involved at every stage of the process of creating a new one. It would be done as a genuine "co-production" process.

This started with the involvement of residents in procuring the architects to do the masterplan. The key thing was the involvement of a few key council officers who were keen to build on the work we had done in engaging local residents, and get us genuinely involved. We worked out, with the officers, an election process so those residents who would sit on the procurement panel would be elected by the community. These residents would have equal say on the scoring of tenders, they would be paid for their time, and they would input into

the tender brief, which would be informed by the alternative regen plan. This was a massive validation of the work we had done, and was key in helping to develop a positive relationship.

It was challenging, and there were a few points where we needed extra support for the community representatives on some technical points, but it actually worked really well. We did have to argue for some of this extra support, and it probably wouldn't have happened if we didn't. The council had never done it before, so didn't know how, or what was necessary. For example, residents were initially prevented from seeing the cost elements of the tenders, but we made the argument that you couldn't make an informed decision without it. We also managed to change the balance of the cost/quality weighting in the process. It was amazing what we were able to do.

We've ended up with some architects (Adam Khan) who really bought into the whole co-production idea. They are really engaged, holding open drop-ins and doing workshops where they educate the residents about technical decisions on light, height, density and so on. They even coming door knocking with us! We're pushing them now to include financial/ viability concerns because design is only half of the picture.

It hasn't been completely problem-free. The regeneration officer working on the new masterplan and leading on the co-production had been seconded to the council from Public Practice (a social enterprise which places built environment professionals in different public bodies to improve the quality of public planning), but had gone on maternity leave. Prior to this officer leaving, PEACH and Newham officers were writing the terms of reference for a steering group which was proposed to co-produce the first phase of the regeneration, as it was felt that the architect procurement process had worked so well. The new master plan was to be done in "co-production". The steering group would be comprised of elected community (not just PEACH) representatives, as well as senior officers from Newham Council. The steering group would have two chairs, one nominated by the community reps, and one from the council. There would be equal numerical representation from community representatives and councillors on each side. The idea was to use the PEACH networks and relationships, and the work done in creating the

alternative regeneration plan in the past, to provide some of the evidence base and the genuine community input for the new masterplan.

However, after the old lead officer left, the new lead took the terms of reference to the legal department, at which point the whole thing froze, and all the shutters came down. Even though the steering group was only intended to give recommendations for the Director to approve and send to the politicians, and was made up of Council officers as well, there was this panic about only the council being able to be a "decision-making body". Obviously, we understand that only the council cabinet can actually approve things, so we were confused about the whole situation. The work paused for several months while the council started to back away from the initial promises made about community input. Rather than genuine co-production, officers were insisting that we could have no "decision-making" power, and this was effectively a normal consultative process. The introduction of uncertainty really tested the relationship between us and the council, and things got a bit uncomfortable.

I think what happened was a mixture of inexperience and fear of the unknown. Nobody had done this before, nobody was really sure what we could actually do, none of the officers were actually sure of what their legal responsibility was or wasn't, and how much power they could actually give away. If there had been some guidance on the practical implications of co-production, and how to go about it, that would have made a massive difference. What happened is they just went into default mode – we "consult" with the community and that's it. The whole momentum behind co-production halted because of this fear of giving power away, or doing something they shouldn't and being held accountable for it.

In the end, after a lot of tension, the co-production process is still ongoing, and we are continuing to work through issues as they arise. On this occasion, the Mayor actually stepped in and took a much more hands-on role than you would normally expect. I think there was a massive obstacle in terms of officers not feeling empowered to act or being unsure what they could do. We overcame this particular hurdle, because there was an intention to do something well on the part of the Mayor, and this was ultimately communicated to the rest of the organisation. But to make it happen you need a clear indication of rights and responsibilities from the

top down. At the same time, the work we had done as PEACH gave the Mayor confidence to act, because we'd shown that given the right support, we were just as capable of doing the work as anyone else and could add value that nobody else could.

Implications for policy and practice

These essays have explored some promising examples of ways to empower communities and neighbourhoods, while also highlighting some of the practical barriers that need to be addressed. What lessons can we learn, as London faces up to the continuing pressures of growth, the impact of long-term public spending cutbacks, and the potential offered by new technology?

1. **One size doesn't fit all…**
    There is a wide range of mechanisms for providing greater influence at the neighbourhood level, and fit seems to depend on local context and need. For example, the failure of proposals for a parish council in Spitalfields and Banglatown reflects the specific politics, history and demographics of that area. Conversely, Queen's Park saw the establishment of a community council, but less interest in neighbourhood planning, as there was less large-scale development taking place in the area. BIDs have proved surprisingly adaptable to local context, but they are unlikely to take root in predominantly residential areas, with few businesses. Respecting the principle of neighbourhood empowerment must also mean respecting the fact that places are different: therefore an imposition of a particular form of neighbourhood governance won't always be appropriate.

2. **…meaning that uptake will need time and look uneven, depending on local civic and political culture.**
    The spread of different forms of neighbourhood governance and influence across London has happened at different speeds, often building on longer-term community development. For example, the experience of Queen's Park Community Council built on a pre-existing democratic culture in the local area. There is also evidence that participatory budgeting processes have better outcomes in places where similar programmes have been carried out previously.[1] Where initiatives are being introduced for the first

time, local participatory culture must be allowed to develop in order to properly take root. Similarly, where innovations are wholly new, they naturally take some time to convince established actors and government bodies of their worth – as has been the case with the slow but steady spread of BIDs.

3. **Community groups need resourcing…**
    Neighbourhood empowerment is easily constrained by resource availability. For example, the right to manage and/or own community assets must not be limited to those who already have the means to acquire and run them. This could mean different things in different contexts – for example, grant funding for a purchase, or in the case of a transfer from a public body, ensuring that maintenance requirements do not become burdensome. Even where capital costs are not involved, neighbourhood empowerment still requires proper resourcing. For example, creating a neighbourhood plan requires technical expertise. Without resourcing, there is a risk that only communities with access to those skills "in-house" will be able to shape their neighbourhoods in this way.

    Of course, one role of councillors and MPs is to exercise influence on behalf of those without it. But that should not be a substitute for neighbourhood empowerment. The essay by Pat Turnbull of London Tenants Federation – and the experience of PEACH in developing a community-led alternative regeneration plan – both show that low-income communities are just as capable of dealing with complex technical issues as wealthier neighbourhoods, provided they are given the right support.

4. **…and public bodies also need resources to support communities.**
    Neighbourhood empowerment should not be seen as a way of saving local authorities money. The need for funding isn't just limited to community and civic organisations, however. For example: having dedicated ward budgets large enough to take meaningful action at the neighbourhood level, and decided through a ward committee, could contribute to empowering

neighbourhoods – but requires funding. Similarly, for ward councillors to act as an effective advocate for their area requires support in terms of officer time, information and training, all of which have resource implications.

5. **Regulatory processes need iterative development.**
Policies need iterative development to respond to changed circumstances or unforeseen issues. For example: creating clear guidance on the extent to which local authorities can collaboratively make decisions with non-statutory bodies would have resolved some of the issues discussed in the interview with Casey Howard of PEACH. Likewise, the unnecessary procedural burdens imposed on BIDs in the balloting process could be revisited in order to make the process work more smoothly. Examples of where this has taken place include the extra planning protection given to pubs listed as Assets of Community Value. This was in response to the popularity of pubs as a category to be listed, something which was perhaps not foreseen by the Localism Act 2011.

   Regulatory requirements for neighbourhood governance should be sufficiently flexible and revisited often enough to allow them to respond to changing circumstances on the ground.

6. **Neighbourhood empowerment means that public bodies need to share power.**
The challenge to existing institutions and decision makers is more than a request for patience and resources, however. Allowing for greater influence at the neighbourhood level in practice involves a transfer of power away from the bodies that currently hold it – and boroughs along with other public bodies can be reluctant to "let go", as highlighted in the essays from Tony Burton of Neighbourhood Planners. London, Pat Turnbull of London Tenant Federation and Karin Woodley of Cambridge House.

   Much of this could be resolved by committed leadership which sees the value in genuine co-production. The experience

of PEACH in Newham is instructive as a lesson in how political leadership can overcome institutional inertia.

Boroughs and other elected bodies should reflect on the value of allowing genuine input into decision making. Whether achieving community consent for developments, providing a level of lived expertise, or acting as "gateways" to other parts of the community that they find "hard to reach",[2] local civic and neighbourhood groups have a crucial role to play. Capacity building can work in both directions.

7. **Success shouldn't be measured narrowly.**
The "success" of different models of neighbourhood governance can lie in the process as well as the outcome. The interview with Casey Howard of PEACH cited in this report illustrates how the process of participation in neighbourhood governance can serve to build confidence, skills, organisational capacity and the ability to work practically with public bodies. This in turn can also boost social cohesion, build social capital, and spur other forms of civic participation.

The case for action

The argument for neighbourhood empowerment has never been stronger, given the challenges and opportunities that London faces:

— London's population is forecast to rise by nearly one million people over the next ten years.[3] Accommodating this growth well will require genuine participation, both to gain popular consent for and to ensure quality of new developments – not least in redevelopment of social housing estates where residents have often felt marginalised and ignored.
— London government has been through a period of almost unprecedented budget constraint. Total budgeted spending has fallen by 35 per cent in real terms since 2010,[4] and the loss of local public services has been exacerbated by a reduction in funding for community groups and the voluntary sector.[5]

— A decline in traditional retail represents a challenge to the vitality of the high street as a focus for neighbourhood life,[6] threatening its function as a place of encounter, exchange, social connection and support – particularly for more disadvantaged Londoners.[7]

— New technology – from local social networks and campaigns to targeted political advertising – is rapidly changing models of social engagement, politics and participation. As well as encouraging ongoing dialogue between councillors and citizens, it is enabling crowdfunding, the rapid growth of online campaigns, and innovative use of data to power policy.

Recommendations for action

In addition to the broader principles of neighbourhood empowerment outlined above, there are a range of concrete actions which could be taken by central government, local government, and community groups now.

Recommendation 1: Local authorities should commit to formally including the neighbourhood in decision making.
Imposing one particular mechanism for neighbourhood empowerment may be inappropriate, but the general principle of devolving power to neighbourhood groups should be respected. As a minimum, local authorities should:

— Make a formal resolution to devolve power to neighbourhood level, in a manner appropriate to the local context and service area. This could require, for example, consideration to be given to how neighbourhood have been involved when taking formal council or cabinet decisions, similarly to how equalities impacts and other statutory requirements are considered.

— Produce clear guidance on how to collaboratively make decisions with non-statutory bodies.

— Create a dedicated role or team, such as a neighbourhoods link officer, tasked with auditing existing local neighbourhood groups/ organisations and incorporating them into governance structures

beyond the traditional consultation processes. The aim would be to require local involvement in all decision-making processes as standard practice.

Recommendation 2: Local authorities and community groups should monitor and evaluate the extent and diversity of participation.

Ensuring that a diversity of voices is heard in local participatory processes is important for a number of reasons: to capture the full variety of knowledge and expertise in a local area, to make sure the benefits of participation are spread equally amongst local residents, and to make sure that the process itself is not exclusionary. Providing an evidence base to ensure that the entire community is represented in neighbourhood governance is a first step. Local authorities and community groups should monitor who is participating in local neighbourhood governance and evaluate the implications, and to ensure that neighbourhood governance mechanisms are as representative of their local area as possible.

Recommendation 3: Local authorities should maximise the neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy, and decide its allocation in partnership with neighbourhood organisations.

Despite the limitations on local government finance, there is scope for existing funding streams to be devolved to a greater degree to the neighbourhood level. Neighbourhood CIL is one such available mechanism. In local areas where development is taking place, authorities are obliged to set aside 15 per cent of CIL receipts to be spent on addressing the demands placed on the area. Where neighbourhood plans are made, this rises to 25 per cent. There are statutory limitations on what each portion of the CIL can be spent on, but there is discretion around the overall amount allocated to the neighbourhood element, how the neighbourhood is defined, and the processes councils can use for allocation.

Local authorities should raise the standard amount allocated to NCIL from 15 per cent to 25 per cent. They should go beyond the 'consultation and engagement processes' mandated in Planning Policy Guidance, and ensure that decisions on local spend of NCIL are taken together with

the neighbourhood, through existing community governance structures where possible.

Recommendation 4: The government should create a Community Wealth Fund – a national endowment to support neighbourhood and community development.

Finding sustainable sources of funding for neighbourhood empowerment is a challenge, particularly for more deprived areas. We endorse the proposal to set up a Community Wealth Fund, which has been put forward by the Community Wealth Fund Alliance, a partnership of 150 different voluntary and community sector organisations across the country. The Fund would be a national endowment to support deprived communities, similar to a sovereign wealth fund, but with asset-based community-led local development as its aim.[9]

The Fund would be financed through the reclaiming of dormant financial assets. A first wave of unclaimed financial assets has already been used for social purposes, following the Dormant Bank and Building Societies Act in 2008. In 2016, a government-led commission recommended that the scheme could be expanded substantially to encompass more unclaimed assets, such as unclaimed proceeds from insurance and pensions products. The Community Wealth Fund Alliance proposes to use the unlocking of these assets as the seed funding for the new Community Wealth Fund.

As a first step, the government should establish a task force to investigate the Fund's feasibility.

Recommendation 5: The government should strengthen the Community Right to Bid for Assets of Community Value.

To reflect the high cost of land in London, consideration should be given to strengthening the Community Rights established in the Localism Act 2011. Only one building listed as an Asset of Community Value under the 2011 Act has since been purchased by a local community group. Even where funds are available to pay the purchase price, landowners are under no obligation to sell to community groups.

The government should consider extending the "moratorium" period

(where landowners are prevented from selling their listed property) from six months to at least a year, to take into account the unique issues London faces.

The government could even go further and follow Scotland's lead in turning the Community Right to Bid into a "Community Right to Buy", where local groups who express an interest in a registered building have statutory first refusal on purchasing the property within an allocated time period. To properly evaluate the take up of this right, government should keep an accurate live central register of all listed Assets of Community Value.

Recommendation 6: The government should pilot the introduction of "Community Improvement Districts" as a new form of neighbourhood governance.

The disconnect between Londoners' desire for more influence in their areas and their inability to exercise it can partly be attributed to a missing layer of governance, between neighbourhoods and borough level. One way of responding to this deficit is the introduction of a new, more flexible form of neighbourhood governance. This new form could build on the best elements of the different approaches to neighbourhood governance that this essay collection has explored. Harnessing the flexibility of the BID model with the civic focus of parish councils, we propose that the government introduce "Community Improvement Districts". These would be a hybrid of the governance models of BIDs and parish councils. They would be:

— Set up at the request of a local neighbourhood group.
— Established through a local ballot, with renewal every five years.
— Operating within a defined geographic area.
— Able to raise a levy on council tax payers.
— Focused on specific issues, agreed on establishment, with expenditure limited to these issues.

They would be less procedurally burdensome to establish than parish councils. Rather than being limited to a particular competence, as

neighbourhood forums are with planning, they could be able to focus on whatever is deemed a local priority, and raise the funds to address these priorities. This would allow neighbourhoods to come together to agree on issues of common importance which could be the subject of action. The regular requirements for ballots to renew their mandate would guarantee both ongoing democratic legitimacy, and also that priorities for action are still relevant for local people.

This essay collection has illustrated the scale of unmet need, as well as the potential for new forms of neighbourhood empowerment. London government rightly calls for devolution, but it must not stop at City Hall or in London's council chambers. It is time for London's communities to become fuller partners in defining the future of their city.

Endnotes

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