

Empowering neighbourhood communities

What happens in our neighbourhoods is vital in improving streets and public spaces for people on foot. When local councils and the community work together, they can make real improvements to our public realm and create the conditions in which people can walk to the shops and services they need.

But too often, local councils and the community can seem to be working against each other rather than working together. Distrust and disagreement become the dominant themes in the relationship.

But things do not have to be this way. New ways of working together can be found to build trust and foster agreement to change our streets. This policy briefing sets out proposals to enable this to happen and to deliver those changes.

Our vision

Living Streets' vision is for streets and public spaces that are better for walking in and for living in. We believe that the community should be involved in improving streets for two reasons.

Firstly, because the community is best placed to know what works and what does not because they use streets everyday and know what makes them succeed or fail. Their involvement means that improvements are more responsive to needs, and resources can therefore be spent to get maximum community benefit.

Secondly, through more active participation in design or delivery, a virtuous circle can be created whereby residents feel a greater sense of ownership of their neighbourhood and improvements are likely to be maintained which can help foster community life and social interaction. This, in turn, reinforces the sense of community pride and ownership.

Living Streets also argues that decisions to improve streets - the "cleaner, safer, greener" issues - are often best made at a neighbourhood level. Devolving powers down to a neighbourhood council, or setting up a parish

or town council, makes it easier for the community to engage with those making policy or delivering services. It can also make it easier to deal with smaller projects which may cross over local council departmental boundaries where the spread of costs and benefits across different departments or agencies would make it hard to justify action.

Developing community involvement at a neighbourhood level needs to be within the context of local government having the necessary powers to deliver local improvements. Critics of the current system say that local government is neither local nor government. The average size of the lowest tier of local government in the United Kingdom is 118,000 people compared to an equivalent 5,000 in Germany and 2,000 in France, yet local councils in Britain have little leeway in what they do or what they spend. Improving the "local" through neighbourhood structures should be accompanied by measures to improve "government", such as devolving powers from central government to local authorities to improve transport and promote alternatives to car use. Not everything can be tackled at a neighbourhood level but confused responsibilities between central government, regional bodies, different levels of local government and other public agencies can stand in the way of improvements.

Government policy

The Government is interested in developing the neighbourhood role of local councils and proposals were developed by David Miliband when he was Minister for Communities and Local Government at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. He gave them the name of "double devolution" in which central government would relax its grip on local councils and give them more powers if they in turn empowered communities. The new Department for Communities and Local Government will now take this agenda forward.

The Government's agenda so far has been based around a national framework which would set out the broad policy in this area. This would be reflected at a local level by local charters which would recognise the ability of people, individuals and groups to take neighbourhood action and the kinds of support they might expect from the council, and which would point to the range of options for neighbourhood action.

Some local authorities have already devolved powers and budgets down to a neighbourhood level. In other areas, the local community has persuaded the council to work with them to make improvements to their area. This briefing includes innovative examples where this is happening.

Our policy

1. Clear framework for role of neighbourhoods and community empowerment

Why: Our experience is that people do want a say over their streets and want to be involved in decisions that affect them. But if people are to have confidence in the expanded opportunities for community involvement at a neighbourhood level, they need to know the overall framework in which this will happen, both nationally and locally.

What: Nationally, such a framework would make clear that there is a long term commitment from government to this

agenda, and not just dependent on who happens to be the current secretary of state. It should set out the rights people have to participate in local decision making.

Local frameworks or charters should include:

- contact information for neighbourhood councils, their powers and how they can support community action;
- rights to involvement and how to get involved - and that involvement need not be an openended commitment and that it allows for both geographic communities and communities of interest to be involved;
- a commitment that community action that has a wider public impact needs to be accountable and work with the council's democratic structures, including councillors;
- allowance for flexibility in community involvement, and for disestablishment of community bodies' responsibilities if the community no longer wishes to be engaged in that way.

How: Government should state clearly that primary local authorities will be required to set out how they are approaching the issue of devolving powers at a neighbourhood level and developing community action, and be required to communicate this to those in their area through a local charter, including their rights to participation.

2. More neighbourhood or parish councils, which would focus on street and public space issues

Why: Decisions affecting street or public space issues are often best made at a neighbourhood level. They can be more responsive to local knowledge and needs and can build a sense of local ownership so that the community has a stake in maintaining any improvements. They can also allow for action on issues that might not be taken up at a higher level, for instance small projects that cut across the remits of different departments or agencies.



Poor quality public spaces and streets lead to people disconnecting from each other. Improving public spaces is a vital part of building and empowering communities.

Neighbourhood or parish councils can also act as the voice and champion of the neighbourhood to higher level agencies, giving a real role to parish councillors or backbench councillors on district, unitary or city councils.

What: There could be flexibility about what form this could take, for instance parish or town councils in rural areas and neighbourhood councils as part of borough, unitary or city councils in urban areas. Focusing on the streets agenda for neighbourhood and parish councils would help improve clarity and understanding about what the different role of each level of local government is.

Neighbourhood councils should be supported by a neighbourhood team, based locally, with a devolved budget and the power to deliver the streets agenda on issues like street maintenance, public realm improvements, the use of powers under the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005, street wardens and banning pavement parking.

The neighbourhood council and team should act as a champion for the area and should help facilitate community action. They should work with the community to develop proposals on issues like Home Zones or traffic calming. Other agencies are important to deliver improvements to streets and public spaces, for instance the police or social housing landlords, and the neighbourhood council should be able to work with the local strategic partnership to co-ordinate action by them.

The neighbourhood council could also build on this remit by taking responsibility or ownership of appropriate public realm (or working with community bodies on this). For instance, this could include small local parks or other open spaces.

The neighbourhood council could also be given powers to draw in funding from elsewhere to meet local needs, for instance on public realm improvements (as set out below in terms of incentive funds). They could work with business improvement districts on this, or be given powers to introduce a temporary precept to raise funds for locally agreed projects.

They should have a strong local presence and should have an open culture different to that of existing local government, for instance in participatory community meetings. The area of community councils should follow natural boundaries based on a walkable neighbourhood rather than the convenience or standardisation of ward boundaries or population size.

Duplication could be avoided through drawing on common resources at a higher local government level.

Case study - Burgess Hill'

Burgess Hill in West Sussex is an example of how a town council can work more effectively at a more local level than higher tier councils. The town council set up a one stop shop in Burgess Hill to deal with complaints about local council services. Many were related to "highways" issues dealt with by the county council, such as weeds, grass cutting, litter and fly-tipping.

The town council has developed the one stop shop further and the county council now delegates to the town council some of its highway functions like clearing weeds in gutters, street sign clearing and removing fly posting. The town council also supervises county council contractors and ensures street works are properly signed and guarded. The town council was able to be more effective than the previous contractor employed to tackle weeds by targeting the roads more susceptible to weed growth. The town council can also top up services it delivers for the county, providing added value and ensuring that high standards of service are maintained.

www.burgesshill.gov.uk

How: The interest and emphasis on devolving powers down to a neighbourhood level is a recognition of the limits of central government's ability to effectively act at this level. Developing neighbourhood governance needs therefore to recognise that the local council and the local community need to shape the local solution to this. However, central government should expect local councils to demonstrate how they have considered this and to state how they will take forward this agenda.

3. Incentive funds to promote development of neighbourhood councils

Why: Although central government cannot and should not direct this process in detail, it can encourage the development of neighbourhood governance and action on street issues. Incentive funds for neighbourhood action on streets would help build the confidence of local people in the neighbourhoods agenda and their willingness to take action as a community by demonstrating visible improvements.

What: Incentive funds which would engage communities and deliver their priorities include funding for home zones, 20mph zones and traffic calming, and for public realm improvements like planting or public art. Home Zones could have a particularly strong role to play both demonstrating improvements to an area and helping build community involvement and solidarity.

How: The Department for Communities and Local Government and the Department for Transport should set aside monies for incentive funds for neighbourhood bodies, including parish councils, to bid for. For the Department for Transport, this should include funding for neighbourhood councils to develop Home Zones. This could be through match-funding, which could encourage partnership working or community involvement in kind, or with a grants scheme.

4. Develop community action and control

Why: Community involvement leads to services which are designed around their needs. This can go beyond mere consultation to give community organisations control or responsibility for services. Improvements resulting from this at a neighbourhood level can build a virtuous circle where people are more willing to build links with others and be involved in civic life.

What: We support the proposals to give communities greater rights to take action to improve their local environment, or to transfer ownership or control of assets to

community organisations (balanced with a duty to ensure accessibility, equality and responsibility). This should include streets and public spaces. Transferring ownership from a public body to a community organisation should be a transfer of assets, not a transfer of liabilities.

Community organisations could take on more responsibility for improving their streets. This could include:

- taking on community services as a community enterprise, for instance post offices;
- taking responsibility for developing proposals for home zones or traffic calming with their council; supporting them to draw in funding from elsewhere;
- managing estates and other developments;
- taking responsibility for open spaces, with ongoing commitment from local authorities to support this through grants;
- development trusts which could grow and develop to take on increased responsibilities for an area.

Case study: Hackney Co-operative Developments

Hackney Co-operative Developments is one example of a community group which is taking responsibility for designing and managing public space. It is working with other partners to turn Gillet Square in Hackney from a car park into a new community square. The project is community-led, and the group wants to persuade the council to allow it to manage the square once it is completed.

www.hced.co.uk

Communities could also be involved in identifying improvements to the street environment through Community Street Audits. The community for these may include those working in the area or visiting it, as well as any residents.

Where community organisations take on general responsibilities affecting the wider community, they need to have in place systems to ensure their accountability to that community. They will need to be open, participative and inclusive to all those living in the area.

How: Local authorities and community organisations should consider starting with smaller community schemes and should agree how they can work together to enable community organisations to take on increased responsibilities over time and how this process can be best sustained.

Public land should remain publicly accountable and accessible. If land is transferred, there should be covenants to ensure accountability and access.

Any new community organisation taking on the kinds of responsibilities outlined above also needs to have a relatively easy process for disestablishing itself if the community decided that it no longer was actively functioning or if its objectives had been achieved.

We agree with the recommendations in the report from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister² that to encourage the transfer of assets to the community, the Government should run a promotional campaign aimed at local authorities, have an incentive fund to help ease the process and introduce a "community right to buy" (or right of first refusal) when assets are being sold.

5. Build community capacity where it is needed most

Why: Communities will only be able to take action where the community is able to organise itself effectively. There is a danger that less well organised communities with weaker community capacity will not be able to benefit from devolution of powers to neighbourhoods. These might often be in more deprived areas or areas with more mobile populations. Efforts to develop community capacity should therefore be targeted at areas where it is weakest. This is not to say that the current situation favours more deprived areas. Without neighbourhood structures, it is often the more affluent and vocal communities who can get their voice heard at a local authority level.

Research in 2005 showed that deprived areas faced greater environmental problems like litter and fly-tipping and that services were often better in more affluent areas where the effects of "social control"

were higher and where residents were more able to influence the level of service. Developing greater community capacity in deprived areas is necessary if all areas are to benefit from the advantages of neighbourhood devolution and greater community empowerment. (See section on evidence and costs for more details).



Case Study: Five Roads Home Zone

There are currently around 70 Home Zones in the UK, all of which have been developed since the late 1990s, but many more streets would be suitable as Home Zones. The Five Roads Home Zone in Ealing is an example of how home zones can encourage wider participation. The chair of the residents group stated,

"In Ealing, a group of residents decided they would like a Home Zone as a way of counteracting a variety of problems in the area, including rat-running, lack of parking space, personal safety and an unattractive street environment. As the project progressed, for many people the main objective became building a community. People still care passionately about providing parking space, but we have begun to relearn the values of neighbourliness."

www.fiveroadsforum.org

What: Street parties help build community organisational capacity and social capital and are often the first step towards community action to deliver improvements to the local area. Communities should have a right to hold a street party and the neighbourhood council should facilitate this (for instance the process of closing the street to traffic).

Home Zones are another way that community organisational capacity and social capital can be built.

How: Central government should continue to target community capacity resources to more deprived areas. Local authorities should also consider whether neighbourhood councils should have differing levels of support depending on their need for community capacity support.

Central government should support the right of communities to hold street parties.

The Department for Communities and Local Government should issue a "how to guide..." on street parties for local authorities, clarifying that for most street parties which are private events and not providing entertainment, insurance and licensing are not needed. Local authorities should have a simple and accessible road closure application form and a standardised Traffic Regulation Order procedure. They should not charge for the road closure service.

6. Develop street councils as a model of community action

Why: Defining a model for how the community can influence their street and neighbourhood could encourage people to get involved. One model could be street councils.

What: Building social capital and community capacity through facilitating street parties could lead to developing "street councils", community organisations that would be independent of local government and which could:

- initiate the development of proposals for home zones or 20mph zones;
- work with the local authority to clean and maintain public areas, or take over responsibility entirely, through 'micro-contracts' from the local authority;
- develop proposals for animating streets or promoting art and planting in streets and street management codes.

'Street councils' could be based on the tenant-management model within social housing. Tenant Management Organisations manage some 85,000 homes, and the associated public space, and have been shown to out-perform the previous council landlord and to compare favourably with the top quarter of social landlords for performance.

How: Local authorities should explore the opportunity to develop street councils. Before any transfer of responsibilities, local authorities should agree about how they could draw on professional expertise and resources and be clear about the process for returning responsibility to the council or for disestablishing the street council.

Street Parties

Streets Alive is a charitable group which promotes culturally thriving communities through traffic-free street events. Their work demonstrates the value of street parties in building communities.



Streets parties can:

- support social cohesion between age groups and ethnic and cultural backgrounds;
- reduce fear of neighbours;
- reduce fear of crime and may reduce crime through watchful neighbours;
- allow residents to get to know young people and reduce anti-social behaviour;
- give children a chance to play together in their street for a day.

www.streetparty.org.uk

7. Improve performance through petitions and agreed standards of service

Why: Local people are often disillusioned when they work with others in their community to seek improvements to their neighbourhood. They often find that local councils are unresponsive or unwilling to engage. The Government's proposals for triggering action through petitions if service levels are not met could help tackle this.

What: Local communities should be able to agree the standards of service they expect from local public bodies (and any ideas for what services they should be) and be able to trigger action if these standards are not met.

The proposed contracts setting out these standards should be rigorous if they are to have meaning beyond the local council. The community council should act as interface between local authority and community in agreeing these.

Petitions are a good way of both raising concerns and organising a community and

should be taken seriously by local authorities. There should be a clear process for how the local authority or other public bodies must respond with what will be done or why they will not take action.

The standards of service agreed for a neighbourhood should include things like:

- street cleaning and maintenance;
- traffic speed / road safety;
- anti-social behaviour.

How: The Government should set out that communities will have a right to petition and trigger action where agreed standards for service are not being met. The Government should also work with voluntary organisations to help communities to constructively engage with local authorities. For instance, petitions on issues like pedestrian crossings are often addressed to the wrong authority or are rejected on technical grounds. This can lead to disillusionment. Advice on who to address petitions to and the ways in which petitions can be framed to be effective would help both communities and councils avoid wasting time and effort in an unconstructive dialogue.

8. Include sustainability in impact assessment

Why: Although led by the Department for Communities and Local Government, all government departments have a role in supporting the neighbourhoods initiative.

What: For instance, the Home Office should consider how to support neighbourhoods to become more involved in restorative justice to build on its work on neighbourhood policing.

All Government departments should also assess their overall policies for the impact they have on local communities and the ability of neighbourhoods to take action to improve their local environment. For instance, shops and services within walking distance provide an important place for neighbouring encounters and help provide an alternative to car use. Failure to protect small post offices or policies which in effect favour larger retailers can reduce the ability of a neighbourhood to build on social interaction and act together.

Case study: Chard and Ilminster Community Justice Panel

The Restorative Community Justice Panel in Chard and Ilminster, which involves local volunteers with the support of professionals in deciding justice for local cases involving drunkenness, nuisance, fly-tipping, and speeding, is considered to have been a success and could be replicated elsewhere.

How: The regulatory impact assessment process could be amended to include a sustainable communities element, where policy changes would be assessed against whether they support sustainable communities. Sustainable communities, according to Government policy, are those that meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equality of opportunity for all.

What you can do

Join a local branch of Living Streets or one of our affiliated groups. Or if you are already a member of a community group, get them to join Living Streets. Information is available on our website at www.livingstreets.org.uk.

Together with others you can ask your local council what is doing to give local people a voice in shaping how streets and public spaces are designed and used. You can also ask them to sign up to Living Streets' local council manifesto or to become a Living Streets member.

Living Streets will also update supporters on the Government's proposals on neighbourhoods and our lobbying on this issue at www.livingstreets.org.uk.

If you are interested in street parties, check out Streets Alive's street party website at www.streetparty.org.uk.

Evidence and Costs

Streets and public spaces

Issues about streets and public spaces, sometimes called liveability issues, are those that people have most interest in locally. A 2001 Mori survey showed that activities for teenagers, crime, public transport and streetscene issues were of the highest salience to them and were most in need of improvement.³

Community involvement

The former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister concluded in 2005 that overall satisfaction and performance levels in situations where users are delivering a service tend to be at least as high, and often higher than local authority provision. In addition, there are broader community benefits from more direct user involvement, for instance tenant management organisations act as a local focus for social and community development activities and improved security.⁴

The National Audit Office concluded that "Community participation is vital in ensuring value for money in public services. Services designed and delivered without community input risk wasting public money because they will be unused or underused if they are not what people need."⁵

More deprived communities

A Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded study in 2005 showed that deprived areas had greater environmental problems than more affluent neighbourhoods, including graffiti, litter, fly-tipping and poorly maintained public and open space. This was partly due to demographics and the nature of the built environment. But it was also due to communities in deprived areas being less able to exercise informal social control of antisocial behaviour.

Meanwhile, residents in neighbourhoods with few problems were fiercely protective of their environmental quality and were often willing and effective complainants. They were better able to access local politicians and command their attention and effort, which had an impact on servic-

es. The report concluded that "at the margin and quite subtly, services were undoubtedly responsive to the demands of residents of more affluent areas".⁶

Willingness to get involved

Evidence suggests that people want to be involved on issues that most directly affect their lives. These are usually issues about their local environment.⁷ Research also suggests that traffic is a main concern. In a 1999 Mori poll, road safety and speed of traffic were top of the list for those respondents who felt that something was wrong with their neighbourhood.

Walkable neighbourhoods

Research on neighbourhoods in Galway found that people in more walkable neighbourhoods walk more and those walking more felt more connected to their community, were more likely to know their neighbours, had greater levels of trust, and were more likely to contact elected officials.⁸

The financial cost

The Young Foundation have carried out extensive research on neighbourhoods. They say that:

- Local government already has a duty to consult citizens and spend budgets on engagement so that they don't waste money on things people don't want - but consultation, engagement and management could be better targeted and pooled.
- In his Treasury review, Sir Peter Gershon estimated the cost of Whitehall's over-regulation of local government at £2.5 billion - much of this can be saved through devolution.
- Local government is already exceeding its targets for efficiency savings, and big savings have been made by communities taking over housing repairs and local environment functions.
- With no new money, one medium-sized county council has a highly effective community engagement programme that costs less than £1 per head, and some metropolitan boroughs are doing neighbourhood working everywhere for £2-3 per head - because the benefits are clear.
- According to a recent YouGov poll, 73% of people support allowing local neighbourhoods to have greater control over some services and budgets.⁹

Sources

¹ Burgess Hill: a new dimension in partnership (NALC - www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk/idk/aio/84860) and Change of Scene (Transport Times, 16.6.06)

² Community Management and Ownership of Assets: Final Report from the Work Group to the Neighbourhoods Project Board (ODPM, March 2006)

³ and ⁴ New Localism - Citizen Engagement, Neighbourhoods and Public Services: Evidence from Local Government (ODPM, January 2005)

⁵ Getting Citizens Involved: Community Participation in Neighbourhood Renewal (National Audit Office, October 2004)

⁶ Cleaning Up Neighbourhoods (Annette Hastings, John Flint, Carol McKenzie, Carl Mills, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2005)

⁷ Revisiting Public Perceptions of Local Government: A Decade of Change (DETR, 2000)

⁸ "Social Capital and the Built Environment: The Importance of Walkable Neighbourhoods" Kevin Leyden in American Journal of Public Health, Sept 2003, vol 93, no 9)

⁹ The True Value of Neighbourhood Arrangements (Young Foundation press release, May 2006, www.youngfoundation.org.uk/index.php?p=303)

For further information Contact Living Streets on 020 7820 1010 or visit www.livingstreets.org.uk

