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What do people and places need from the Big Society?

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In the last decade neighbourhoods have been the target for a wide range of national initiatives and legislation with physical regeneration, social renewal, community engagement and better public services in mind.

In spite of this many people remain disengaged from local politics and feel unable to influence decisions that matter to their daily lives. In many cases national regeneration programmes have not brought about long-lasting improvements for the most deprived neighbourhoods and have been criticised for focusing on physical rather than underlying social issues.

Four key issues repeatedly emerge from our work with communities around the country:

- How can people influence decisions that matter to their daily lives?
- Why does bureaucracy get in the way of fixing local problems?
- Why is communication between local authorities, local agencies and residents often so poor?
- What can local and central government do to engage individuals and communities in local decision making?

These are crucial questions for central and local government at a time when public sector spending is under pressure.

In this briefing we put forward practical ideas about what communities need from the Big Society to support local engagement, social renewal and improve local quality of life. These ideas are drawn from four years of ongoing research at the Young Foundation, involving over 50 partners from local and central government, the IDeA, LGA and HCA, the voluntary and community sector and Joseph Rowntree Foundation in our work on innovation in neighbourhoods and social housing. Our partners have included local authorities governed by all three main political parties and representing rural, urban and suburban communities around England.

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1. Why communities matter for social renewal

37 % of people felt they could influence decisions in their local area[1]
76% of us feel we belong strongly to the neighbourhood in which we live[2]
73% support changes that would give local neighbourhoods greater control over some services and budgets[3]
63% of us say we are prepared to invest the time necessary to influence change[4]
35% say they want a neighbourhood forum which anyone can attend, and **23%** a new kind of neighbourhood council[5]

Belonging, identity and social life

Communities of place matter to people. Most children go to school in or very near where they live. Many of the public services people interact with regularly are delivered in the community, regardless of how they are organised or managed by public agencies. Doctors, community health workers, social workers, teachers, nurseries, housing, parks and sports facilities, libraries, waste and recycling, bus services, policing, care services and many more, are experienced at neighbourhood level, with many others like hospitals, benefits advice or help looking for work, received in the extended local area. Neighbourhoods are where people, public services and by extension, the state intersect on a daily basis.

For many people, their local community is an important site of social interaction. Communities play a fundamental role in our sense of belonging, identity and local wellbeing. Research on social capital and wellbeing suggests that everyday interactions with friends, family and neighbours play a crucial role in sustaining a sense of community but can be extremely fragile. Even subtle changes at local level like the closure of a local shop or disappearance of a playgroup or lunch club, can have a significant impact on perceptions of community spirit and thereby, community wellbeing.[6]

Arguably, local authorities under financial pressure have a greater need than before to keep residents engaged in order to support and protect social networks that offer local support and to break down barriers and reduce tensions between different social, faith or ethnic groups in neighbourhoods.

Experience from neighbourhood management and neighbourhood policing has demonstrated how working locally improves relationships between residents, councillors and public agencies, improves local service delivery, and tackles day-to-day issues that cause conflict and dissatisfaction in neighbourhoods.

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[1] Citizenship Survey April - June 2009
[2] Citizenship Survey April - June 2009
[3] LGIU YouGov poll 2006
[4] Together We Can poll Spring 2006
[5] LGIU YouGov poll 2006
[6] *Neighbourliness + Empowerment = Wellbeing,* Mandeep Hothi, Nicola Bacon, Marcia Brophy and Geoff Mulgan, Young Foundation (2008)

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New economic pressures for the most deprived neighbourhoods

In the last decade a wide range of initiatives have been directed at neighbourhoods with physical regeneration, social renewal and community empowerment in mind; from Neighbourhood Renewal Funding (NRF), targeting over £2 billion at England's most deprived communities, to Neighbourhood Management pilots, Neighbourhood Policing, Local Area Agreements intended to devolve responsibility and localise the settlement between central and local government, and more recently the new Duty to Involve placed on local authorities. Arguably, significant progress has been made in encouraging local government to think seriously about what individual neighbourhoods need, especially in deprived areas, and how to get people involved at street or community level. Many local authorities have adopted some kind of approach to neighbourhood working, with councillor-led community forums or ward panels and variations on neighbourhood management among the most popular.

Yet deprivation remains entrenched in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods where regeneration has often failed to bring long-lasting improvements in quality of life for families. It is many of these communities where the effects of the recession are now most keenly felt, in particular where local employment is dependent on just one or two major employers.

It is likely that many local authorities will be forced to think about cutting spending on resource intensive approaches to local working, like neighbourhood management that are commonly funded through discretionary budgets and therefore disproportionately effected by the recession. Currently, these services do much to help build a sense of belonging and community spirit by creating spaces for people to interact with neighbours through local events, street parties, public meetings, consultation and community planning work. They also provide an important conduit between frontline intelligence about what is happening in neighbourhoods and strategic service planning.

2. A new approach to thinking about communities

The recession will force central government and local authorities to reconsider strategies for service delivery and tackling deprivation and to seek out new approaches to old problems. It is also a catalyst for government to rethink priorities and relationships with residents and the voluntary sector. Evidence and practical experience have shown that working at estate, neighbourhood or community level is successful and effective at bringing agencies together with residents to tackle local problems. Arguably it is time to shift the focus of this work from improving the physical environment and targeting crime to tackling the persistent, underlying causes of deprivation and disadvantage. In the future neighbourhood working should focus on local wellbeing and supporting initiatives to create engaged, resilient and sustainable communities.

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There are three key challenges in reconnecting people to local politics and decision making:

- decision-making is too distant to be relevant to people's everyday lives
- meaningful opportunities for people to influence decisions and shape local services (rather than be consulted on pre-determined options) are limited
- local engagement and governance structures are too complex and bureaucratic for many people to understand how and where they can make a difference

To address this there needs to be:

- **Radical devolution of power to councils and communities:** Power needs to be located where it can best address people's needs and priorities – closer to communities. This means a simultaneous devolution from central government to local government, and from local government to people and very local communities – the neighbourhoods, suburbs, villages and market towns in which we live.

- **Opportunities everywhere, not initiatives somewhere** local authorities everywhere should be encouraged to develop a manifesto for communities that sets out how they will inform, consult and involve residents and communities on a whole range of different issues using a variety of creative and meaningful approaches, from **web polling** and **text-based information**, to **neighbourhood charters** or **participatory budgeting**. This means community engagement needs to be part of **everyday business for local authorities** and other agencies delivering public services to communities.   Incentives and performance measures for local authorities need to reflect this.

- **Make this clear to residents through a language of rights and powers** empowerment and devolution needs to be real and meaningful to residents and communities if it is to impact on peoples trust in, and engagement with local authorities.   We suggest a language of "rights and powers" for citizens (not government jargon of LAAs, LSPs or performance indicators) that can simply articulate what people can expect from their local authority.

- **Local authorities need to lead on devolution and community empowerment**.   All over the country there are examples of innovative and successful ideas for involving and supporting local communities. Many local successes are driven by community organisations, or community practitioners and frontline staff in local authorities, while significant improvements have been made by the police and health authorities in democratising these services. However, huge improvements can be made by **encouraging local authorities to look at communities more strategically** in their role as placeshapers and guardians of wellbeing. Many are already doing innovative and effective work and there is a wealth of experience in community development and neighbourhood teams. However, in many places this experience remains siloed and does not influence how other public agencies deliver services. For example, there is scope for local government to be the catalyst to connect communities to sub-regional economic development initiatives, like training people for new growth sectors. Communities are rarely linked effectively to regional or sub-regional development projects on worklessness or skills training, yet unemployment often has concentrated local impacts.

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Social innovation in communities: new ways to tackle old problems

Creating resilient and sustainable communities will mean councils need to develop new relationships with residents and the voluntary sector and look for innovative ways to develop creative – but practical and low-cost – ways to apply new approaches to old problems.

This needs to include more work on understanding and fostering strong social networks, promoting formal and informal volunteering, celebrating the strengths of local communities, improving communication by providing easily accessible local intelligence. This does not have to mean developing and trialling complex new ways of working, but looking to other sectors and countries to see what existing ideas and innovations can be rapidly adapted to the problems local authorities face, such as:

Embedded timebanks to support new forms of volunteering: the number of local volunteers is likely to rise as unemployment increases. Local authorities should consider new forms of **timebanking** that allow people to get involved in their community by volunteering in return for council tax or rent reductions. **SPICE** is a new form of embedded timebanking hosted by a local agency like a housing association or school. Local people offer their time in return for time credits that can be redeemed against a range of local services that have real world value.

Supporting hyper-local media: like community blogs and forums, citizen reporting, neighbourhood radio, or websites like www.fixmystreet.com. www.pledgebank.com and www.harringayonline.com have huge potential to improve communication between residents and services, broaden engagement and increase transparency and accountability. Councils could support the development of neighbourhood media by helping communities use freely available social media tools, releasing publically held data in reusable formats, and by using social media to converse with citizens about local issues.

A new approach to community assets: taking a new look at how councils define community assets so **pubs, post offices** or **local shops** can combine to become **neighbourhood hubs**; empty shops can be used to **create 'pop-up' community services** – temporary neighbourhood drop-in centres, youth facilities or lunch clubs for older people; or **slivers or unused public space** can be turned into community gardens for growing vegetables, bee-keeping, herb gardens or community orchards (see story about Newsome in Huddersfield).

Micro-finance and micro-enterprise: lessons can be learnt from developing countries about micro-finance and community enterprise that could provide crucial volunteering opportunities and routes to work for the recently redundant and long-term unemployed.

Innovations from the frontline: financial pressures will result in public agencies wanting to find faster routes to innovation. Encouraging service managers and councillors to spend time in neighbourhoods riding with bin men, collecting recycling, spending time with community health workers, spending a day with youth outreach workers – is one way to find real insights to the problems with service delivery and would reduce barriers between frontline staff and service managers.

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> **Sustainable funding for community groups:** as public sector spending is cut more pressure will be placed on local community organisations to meet social needs. However, short-term grant funding prevents many community groups from developing a sustainable business model. Alternatives are needed such as a Social Impact Bond for the voluntary sector or asset-based investment.

3.   How would this work in practice?

Local government should be given more power to decide on things that matter to people in their areas.   At the same time we need to strengthen the ability of neighbourhoods and local communities to influence decisions and get involved in local issues, building on good experience around the country.

There should be more power for people in communities:

- **powers to act** on very local issues, like tackling problems with public spaces, crime and grime that are often seen by councils as "too small" to deal with.

- **powers to influence** decisions about other local services like street cleaning, waste disposal and recycling and youth services, and more strategic services like health and education – redesigning consultation to enable residents to express needs and local issues before services are designed, rather than consulting after the fact

- **powers to call to account** and publicly challenge public agencies and decision-makers, such as the police and planners, including making it easy for them, should they wish, to help in performance management of contracts. Through **community inquiries, community taskforces, hyper-local community media** such as **citizen reporting, local websites.**

Where they want, people should be able to set up and work through **community or neighbourhood bodies** – for example, councils, forums, development trusts or partnerships – that can give a voice to communities and work on local priorities.

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The 21st Century Parish

Parish councils are the ideal vehicle to transfer power to communities. Parishes have a democratic mandate and pre-existing powers to raise funds through a precept, manage assets, deliver local services and lead on community engagement. Many innovative parishes are doing this and more – running community shops, providing adult training courses, managing local sports facilities and providing top-up social care services.

Community councils could be given new powers and budgets and the encouragement to drive forward community wellbeing initiatives. Innovative approaches to asset transfer could see neighbourhood councils taking a lead on **urban agriculture, community energy** or **sustainable food projects,** by taking over buildings and land in a neighbourhood.   **Urban community land trusts** are potential vehicles to address local housing need, community development and to support local social enterprise. Neighbourhood councils could play a key role in supporting asset transfer.

All communities should have the right to establish a community council, including those in London boroughs.

Essex County Council has devolved a capital budget of £2 million, the Communities Initiatives Fund, to its parish and town councils to help develop their capacity and ensure good value. For each of the 12 Essex districts, £150,000 was devolved to panels composed entirely of representatives of the first-tier councils plus the county cabinet member for localism. Milton Keynes has one of the best-developed models of cooperation with parish and community councils, with impressive results, while also providing a (presently rare) urban example of this practice.

This is happening already in many places, and many more will want to follow. But many will lack the interest or the readiness. So in every community,

- **local councillors** should be given the support, powers and local budgets to take on a stronger community role - advocating for their communities, working with community-based organisations and residents, challenging local services to meet residents' priorities and needs
- **local authorities and other service providers** should provide citizens and communities with the   information they need and opportunities to get involved in a whole range of different ways
- **local people** should have the chance to participate in service planning or delivery, to propose community initiatives, call for community inquiries or set up a local taskforce to investigate issues with service delivery.

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What do we mean by 'community bodies'?

Where there is public demand, local people should be able to set up neighbourhood bodies to raise their voice together, improve services and tackle problems they identify collectively. These could include:

- **community or neighbourhood councils** (reformed parish councils) with a democratic mandate and well-being powers, able to raise money to fund local improvements, and to take over responsibility for some local services. They could choose to be known as neighbourhood, village or town councils

- **community trusts or neighbourhood associations** development trusts or other local organisations that can work in partnership with local authorities to manage community assets or services, lead on community engagement and empowerment initiatives with the local authority or feeding into local authority structures, be able to raise money to fund local improvements through **Pledgebank** or other independent local schemes

- **community forums or partnerships** with less formal powers, bringing together residents, possibly with community organisations or service providers, to shape what happens in the area

What powers should community bodies have?

Community bodies should: have a voice in **influencing** strategic plans, services and key decisions across the wider area, especially the opportunity to contribute to discussions about Local Area Agreements and the work of Local Strategic Partnerships. They should be able to **shape** services in their own area. They could be **delegated additional powers** over budgets and services. They could also engage in campaigning to address problems and call poor services to account.

Local community councils should also be able to:

- **provide extra services** on top of existing ones where residents wish, raising the money by asking them for a small sum when they pay their council tax
- take part in discussions about the wider area is run and to scrutinise decisions made by local authorities.

Where they meet certain quality and administrative tests, they could even decide themselves to take over particular, very local services from the council, such as small repairs, a park, neighbourhood wardens, graffiti removal or a community centre. They could win greater influence over neighbourhood policing, extended school plans, and even planning.

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Is the future about residents delivering services?

The Young Foundation's research has found that local people in many areas would like to see greater resident control and influence over a consistent set of services, primarily concerning crime and grime in their immediate environment. Many communities also want meaningful opportunities to engage in dialogue about how mainstream services can reflect local priorities, as statutory consultation processes are often seen as a tickbox exercise. Many residents and local organisations would welcome the opportunity to become involved in dialogue about services at a much earlier stage than is currently the case.

There are a wide range of non-statutory services that could be managed or delivered by neighbourhood-based organisations, from top-up social care and health management to recycling and parks maintenance.

A model for community involvement in service delivery

Source: Young Foundation, April 2006
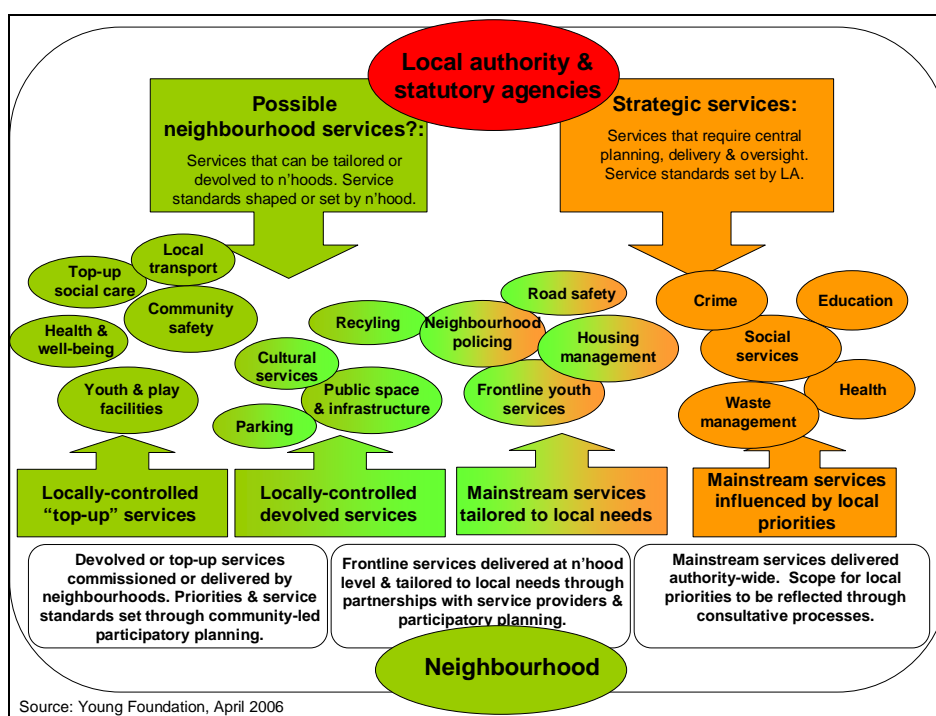
Community involvement in services: lessons learnt

Common obstacles to localising or devolving services include concerns from local authorities about efficiency and economies of scale, the need for universal standards, and the difficulties of identifying elements of an authority-wide service contract that can economically be disaggregated for delivery to a single neighbourhood or community. There are many examples of community involvement in service planning and localised service delivery which demonstrate improved services, cost savings and wider benefits to the local community. Demand for involvement in service planning and delivery vary from place to place depending on the quality of services that neighbourhoods currently receive and the willingness and capacity of community organizations and volunteers to get involved.

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Many voluntary and community sector organisations are interested in delivering local services.   However, it is important that local groups do not get pushed into inappropriate service delivery. Contract funding should not replace grant funding for the third sector.   Localising public services demands strong commitment to joint working from the key partners in neighbourhoods: community organisations, housing associations, police, councils and other mainstream service providers.

Communities Managing Services

HARCA, London Borough of Tower Hamlets
Poplar Housing and Regeneration Community Association in Tower Hamlets is a registered social landlord managing more than 6,000 homes. Housing rejuvenation has gone hand in hand with community led regeneration projects centred on employment and training, young people and advice amongst others.

Wyecycle, Kent County Council
Household waste is now 25% of what it was in Brook, Kent, thanks to Wyecycle, a community recycling initiative, commissioned by Kent County Council.

Community speed guns, Surrey County Council
Residents of some Surrey villages have been particularly concerned about speeding in their area, so the local police force began to train villagers to operate hand-held speed guns, cutting average speeds significantly. Communities have now overwhelmed the police force with demand for the scheme, which tackles a long-standing gripe.

Witton Lodge Community Association, Perry Common, Birmingham
Brought together to renovate former council properties on the Perry Common estate in Birmingham, residents have gone even further, building and managing an extra care housing scheme. The surplus made from the scheme is invested into street scene improvements. Residents now steer the delivery of environmental services in the area, prioritising Birmingham City Council's street scene budgets to meet their needs.

Young Foundation, 2005-2006

How can we make sure they are run properly and work for everyone in the area?

There have been cases in the past where community organisations have been taken over by unrepresentative groups, or where their actions have caused problems for nearby neighbourhoods. To overcome this, we propose that a **clear framework of standards** should be applied to neighbourhood bodies:

- how many times the body should meet
- how it should operate democratically and be open to everyone;
- how the body should work with councillors
- how the body should promote good community relations and avoid discrimination
- how the body should ensure good management and financial probity.

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How can the role of local councillors be strengthened?

Elected councillors should play an important role in every community. At the moment many 'backbench' councillors feel unclear about their role, and where to strike the balance between representing the council and their local communities. In spite of the Commission on Local Councillors and other work, many councillors do not feel empowered or are not engaging with communities effectively.

We recommend every ward or division should have at least one **'community councillor'** with a clear and well-publicised mandate to represent community views, dedicated officer support, and a small budget to make things happen in their ward. They would be expected to engage actively with local communities and service providers, broker relationships and help tackle problems. Reforms should give them:

-   a **right of reply** from all service providers, and the power to carry forward a **community call to action** to investigate and hold failing services to account
-   where there is a case, the chance to hold time-limited **neighbourhood inquiries** to investigate persistent local problems by bringing together services providers and residents
-   new powers to join local bodies (eg local community councils, possibly schools), and to propose a neighbourhood forum or council where none exists.

Councillors need much greater support if they are to play a more active role in communities. Our research suggests they need:

-   **clear definition of their role and responsibilities**: especially in relation to unelected community representatives, to make it easier for residents and community organisations to understand what councillors can do to help them, and for council officers to work more effectively with councillors
-   **a new type of member support**: councillors are concerned about their capacity to fulfil a more complex and demanding future role without better basic support. Support needs include: better administrative back-up (access to paperwork for meetings, appointments and surgeries, support with casework), help with community engagement, training to use ICT
-   **help to develop a new set of skills:** councillors need more personalised training that takes into account specific local challenges, such as dealing with community conflict, understanding equalities and community cohesion issues, or new approaches to community engagement. Training needs to be more flexible to reflect the time pressures that councillors face

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How can residents & community organisations raise issues or get involved?

Opportunities for involvement should also be opened up which local people and organisations can access directly:

- **community involvement in services**: for instance, running part of a service for the council, or local groups may commit to cleaning up an area regularly in return for new lighting
- **public participation in setting agendas**: giving people the chance to be involved in identifying priorities and developing local plans
- **community initiatives:** including by petitions, which could trigger public hearings and debate.

Local organisations could ask residents to give them a '**Community Right to Buy**' over a local building or land. This right of first refusal is based on the one which exists in Scotland. Community assets and buildings are one important way in which local capacity and shared space can be developed.

What can people expect of local public services?

Local government and other public services (the police, the primary care trust, housing associations, transport agencies) should respond to neighbourhood concerns swiftly and effectively. Where there are good reasons why it is not possible to do what neighbourhoods want, services should offer reasons and feedback. Public services should provide clear points of contact for local issues, make sure their local statistics and information are easy to find and use, and identify where people can get involved. Through appropriate avenues, residents should be able to:

- **influence** key strategic plans or services, like social care, that need to be developed and organised at the local authority level
- **tailor** services provided locally within an area-wide framework, such as housing, youth services, children's play, welfare advice, or community outreach provided by health or welfare agencies
- **deliver** some services locally (in practice, this means a small number of local environment functions) provided it will not negatively affect other areas.

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What should local authorities do to help make this happen?

Government should enable councils and communities to respond to local priorities in a variety of ways, and avoid hampering good work already underway. In each place, local government should be able to decide how it will work to empower local people in neighbourhoods. Councils should:

- be clear and open about what they can offer to people in neighbourhoods, possibly through an empowerment manifesto
- map the neighbourhoods and communities with which people identify across their area
- strengthen powers, support and capacity for their frontline councillors, and for neighbourhood bodies established locally
- make sure that neighbourhood data and information are easily available
- work with other public services to develop a shared, open and participatory approach to consultation and joint working
- be more responsive, open and accountable about the services they provide
- make sure their services can be influenced or tailored to meet local concerns
- ensure that they can respond effectively to proposals for neighbourhood inquiries and to community calls to action and petitions
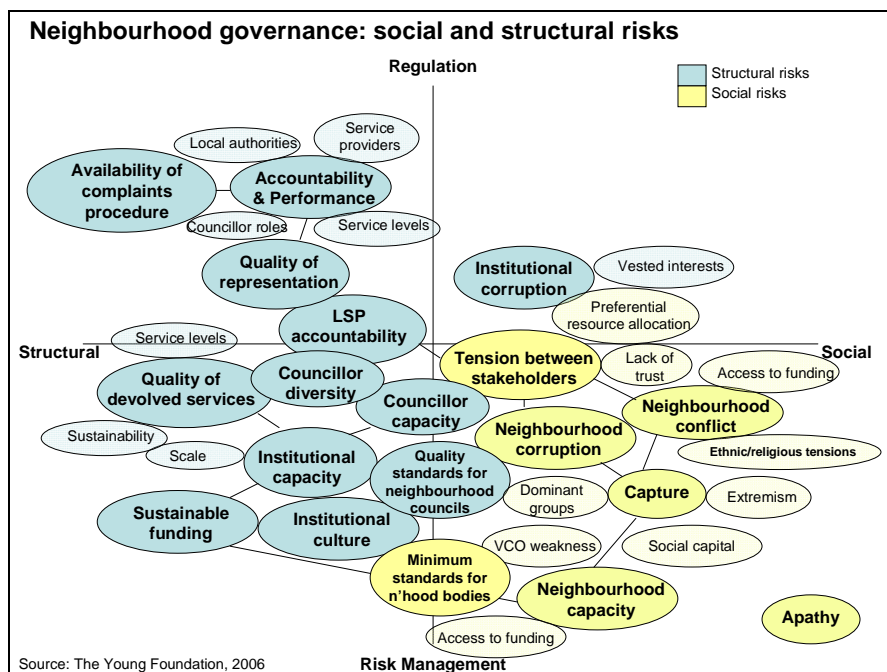- continue to channel enhanced resources to their most deprived areas.

Developing this agenda will be challenging for local government. It may involve fundamental changes to the way councils prioritise budgets and organise services and structures. It will require sustained investment in strategic and local capacity over a decade or more. But local government has considerable capacity and political will to take a lead in empowering its citizens and communities. Many councils are already showing the way, and seeing the benefits of local responsiveness and engagement.

Managing the risks of empowered communities

Concerns about risk focused on concerns about how to achieve a balance between giving communities some influence or control over local issues, and ensuring that local action did not encourage communities to compete or become inward-looking. Some felt that conflict between different social or ethnic groups at neighbourhood level presented too great a risk to give communities direct influence over local decisions or resources.

Previous experiments with devolution have proved that community control over finances, services and assets also brings threats of fragmentation, mismanagement of public goods, politicisation of neighbourhood issues, and the potential for localised power to create or exaggerate community divisions.

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Mapping the risks of community governance

Neighbourhood governance: social and structural risks

Regulation

Structural risks
Social risks

Local authorities
Service providers

Availability of complaints procedure
Accountability & Performance

Councillor roles
Service levels

Quality of representation

Institutional corruption
Vested interests
Preferential resource allocation

LSP accountability

Structural

Service levels

Quality of devolved services
Councillor diversity
Councillor capacity

Tension between stakeholders
Lack of trust
Access to funding
Social

Neighbourhood conflict

Sustainability
Scale

Institutional capacity
Quality standards for neighbourhood councils

Neighbourhood corruption
Ethnic/religious tensions

Dominant groups
Capture
Extremism

Sustainable funding
Institutional culture

VCO weakness
Social capital

Minimum standards for n'hood bodies
Neighbourhood capacity

Apathy

Access to funding

Source: The Young Foundation, 2006
Risk Management

Our research identified three main categories of risk associated with stronger community governance:

- Risks associated with the inclusiveness, accountability and performance of neighbourhood bodies, raise important questions about the legitimacy and status of neighbourhood organisations as representative bodies. These concerns also highlight wide variations in capacity between neighbourhood bodies.
- Risks associated with institutional commitment and capacity to empower neighbourhoods, including lack of political will to support neighbourhood empowerment, and a lack of capacity within local authorities to make neighbourhood governance a practical reality.
- Risks associated with neighbourhood capacity and social capital, such as the huge variation in levels of social support and practical skills within neighbourhoods. This could mean that more affluent neighbourhoods disproportionately benefit from new opportunities for local action, because they are more able to organize, articulate their interests, and raise funds.

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Risk management: lessons learnt

- Political extremism, corruption, and capture are the risks most often cited in arguments against neighbourhood empowerment.
- Many communities and local authorities are already dealing with the above risks in the context of existing structures such as ward committees, area forums or NDCs.
- Other risks, such as lack of capacity and lack of political leadership and support for neighbourhood working, have more real, practical implications for the success of the neighbourhood working.
- Local government and public agencies need support for a programme of capacity building for institutional stakeholders in order to manage the risks arising from lack of resources and skills. Capacity building is particularly relevant among, elected members, key council officers, LSPs and other service providers.
- It is crucial that central and local government accept that experimentation with neighbourhood governance arrangements will require space for local innovation that involves some risk.

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About the Young Foundation

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

www.youngfoundation.org

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