



THE YOUNG FOUNDATION

Neighbourhood working: where do we go from here?

Towards a new research agenda -

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Neighbourhoods have undisputedly risen up the political agenda for national and local government in the last decade. All three main political parties have made commitments to empower neighbourhoods by improving the delivery of public services, revitalising local democracy, and giving people greater influence and in some cases control, over local decision making, services and community assets.

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.

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, and Local Area Agreements intended to devolve responsibility and localise the settlement between central and local government. More recently, new legislation has introduced new powers for councillors and communities, created a new duty on local authorities to involve communities in decision making, and where reasonable, to devolve power directly to them, and is supported by an enhanced performance framework with new national indicators measuring how able people feel to influence local decision making.

As a result, some local authorities are introducing neighbourhood agreements, experimenting with devolved budgets and participatory budgeting, developing new forms of localised decision making or supporting new forms of neighbourhood governance such as urban parishes. A smaller number are attempting to mainstream neighbourhood working by identifying natural neighbourhoods and coordinating with the police and other agencies to plan and deliver services on a very local basis.

These are important changes to the way local authorities think about and engage with people. Experience from neighbourhood management and neighbourhood policing has repeatedly demonstrated that 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.

However, in the bigger picture these are small steps: many local authorities remain reluctant to give councillors and residents more control over local issues, citing issues of representation, risk, accountability or previous failures as reasons to retain centralised control. There is also a broader issue about continuing government support for neighbourhoods as a policy concept. The neighbourhood as 'policy sphere', in particular, as a spatial unit for thinking about tackling social issues, has been a strong focus for the Labour government in the last decade. In spite of this, neighbourhoods remain conspicuously absent from national policy on economic development and employment, and at times, there have appeared to be conflicting policy agendas running in parallel, such as political support for a double devolution of power from Whitehall to Town Halls to communities, appearing to compete with proposals for city-regions and city mayors.

It could be argued that the 'neighbourhoods agenda' is now at a crossroads. The local government White Papers, *Strong and Prosperous Communities* and *Communities in Control*, did not push through the radical and far-reaching changes that supporters of the policy agenda had hoped for, with limited devolution of real powers to either neighbourhoods or local authorities. The progress made on neighbourhood renewal and empowerment over recent years is now at risk from direct and indirect threats arising from the recession, such as:

- *Greater financial pressures for local authorities:* public sector spending cuts, local authority job losses, council tax rises and the pressure to cut back on what are seen as non-essential public services, may mean that work on community engagement, neighbourhood management and empowerment will be seen by councils as an unaffordable luxury. Levels of local and national political engagement are still falling and, arguably, the pressure communities are under from rising levels of debt, worklessness and associated social tensions makes work on cohesion and empowerment even more important than ever.
- *Evidence for the impact of community empowerment remains hard to come by* because of the multiplicity of factors and interventions that impact on neighbourhood working, which in tough times makes it harder to build a business case for investing in local ways of working.
- *A new administration and new priorities?* The potential for a change of government at the next election raises questions about a change of direction in policy on devolution and empowerment. David Cameron has recently reinforced his party's commitment to radical decentralisation, announcing new policies that would give councils power to set local business rates, proposing referenda on 12 new directly-elected mayors, and empowering people to veto council tax rises. However, these policies fall short of the radical decentralisation promised and may do little to reassure councils who

are yet to commit to localism that neighbourhood working is indeed an appropriate way forward.

- *Limited success in tackling broader social issues in neighbourhoods:* neighbourhood working is often limited to tackling 'grime and crime' problems such as street lighting, cleaning, open spaces and graffiti. In part, this is driven by community priorities, but is also a reflection of local governments' attitude to risk and a general anxiety about allowing people to influence decisions that may impact on a wider audience than the immediate neighbourhood. It is also a reflection of the many political challenges involved in good partnership working and the difficulty that many authorities face in coordinating work across different council directorates and public agencies. These challenges often limit the impact that neighbourhood working can have on tackling entrenched social problems such as long-term unemployment or benefits dependency. Even large-scale regeneration initiatives such as Neighbourhood Renewal Funding and New Deal for Communities have had limited long-term success at tackling the underlying social problems in deprived areas. Arguably, this is not a result of neighbourhood working but of how it is employed.

In spite of these challenges and the financial constraints that councils are facing, the recession presents an opportunity for innovation to flourish in communities. Councils will be under increasing pressure to do more with fewer resources at a time when public expectations are rising and neighbourhoods are likely to need more, not less, support to tackle new and entrenched social problems.

It is likely that many local authorities will be forced to think about cutting spending on resource-intensive approaches to neighbourhood working, like neighbourhood management, that currently 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. 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 neighbourhood level like the closure of a local shop or disappearance of a lunch club, can have a significant impact on perceptions of community spirit and thereby, community wellbeing.¹

Arguably, local authorities under financial pressure have a greater need than before to keep residents engaged in order to support and protect strong and far-reaching social networks, to breakdown barriers and reduce tensions between different social, faith or ethnic groups in neighbourhoods, and to maintain networks that can be drawn on to tackle local problems. Volunteering is a good example of how informal local networks can strengthen contact between different groups. In 2005, 73 per cent of people who regularly participated in formal and informal volunteering activity had friends from different income groups to their own, compared to 67 per cent of those who do not volunteer; 55 per cent of those regular

¹ *Neighbourliness + Empowerment = Wellbeing*, Mandeep Hothi, Nicola Bacon, Marcia Brophy and Geoff Mulgan, Young Foundation (2008)

volunteers also had friends from a different ethnic group, compared to 45 per cent who did not regularly volunteer.²

As with other sectors of the economy, local government will “*need to prepare for a long and deep recession which will require radically different policies, from direct job creation to support for exchange networks that enable people to share time, skills and assets*”.³

This means taking a new approach to thinking about neighbourhoods, shifting from an emphasis in many places on the environment and local crime, to focusing on the strong link between wellbeing and neighbourhoods and the role of local initiatives to build and support resilience amongst individuals and communities. This could include more work on understanding and fostering strong social networks, promoting formal and informal volunteering, celebrating the strengths of local communities, as well as making sure there are good local linkages to new mental health support through a wide range of services, like Jobcentre Plus and SureStart.

Councils will also need to develop new relationships with residents and the voluntary sector to look for innovative ways to develop creative – but practical and low-cost – ways to apply new approaches to old problems. 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:

- *Social networking and hyperlocal community websites:* a simple example of how a highly effective idea could be adopted by councillors and councils to talk to more residents and local groups – improving performance and making financial savings. They are free, simple to use and likely to engage a new audience, yet very few councillors currently use social networking sites and even fewer local authorities are using them in a coordinated way. This seems in part, due to anxieties about excluding citizens who are not able to access the internet. While this is a reasonable and valid concern, it is not reason enough for agencies to overlook the internet’s potential as another channel for citizen engagement. There is a need for a
- *New forms of volunteering:* the number of local volunteers is likely to rise as unemployment increases. Local authorities should consider new forms of time banking that allow people to get involved in their community by volunteering in return for council tax or rent reductions.
- *New 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; or using empty shops to create ‘pop-up’ community services – temporary neighbourhood drop-in centres, youth facilities or lunch clubs for older people.

² *Neighbourhood Management and Social Capital*, Marilyn Taylor, Department for Communities and Local Government (2007)

³ *Fixing the Future*, Geoff Mulgan, Omar Salem Young Foundation (2009)

- *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.
- *Back to the floor...*: financial pressures could result in public agencies wanting to find faster routes to innovation. Encouraging service managers and councillors to spend time on the frontline of service delivery – 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.
- *Connecting neighbourhoods to regional economic development*: at the other end of the spectrum, there is scope for local government to be the catalyst to connect neighbourhoods to sub-regional economic development initiatives, like training people for new growth sectors. Neighbourhoods are rarely linked effectively to regional or sub-regional development projects on worklessness or skills training, yet unemployment often has concentrated local impacts.



The Young Foundation is a centre for social innovation. Our main goal is to speed up society's ability to respond to changing needs through innovating and replicating new methods and models. Our work programme has three strands – Launchpad, Local innovation and Research - all of which complement each other in the shared goal of finding practical initiatives to meet unmet needs. The Foundation was launched in 2005, but builds on a long history. Our predecessor organisations under Michael Young were responsible for far-reaching innovations such as the creation of the Open University, as well as pioneering research on changing patterns of community and family life.

The **Local Innovation** team works with local and central government, public agencies and communities to tackle the challenges of daily life – from emotional resilience to neighbourliness, from sustainability to youth crime. We do this by helping people and institutions share power, knowledge and experience to better collaborate and innovate, using action research, practical projects and policy development. The team works at all levels, from neighbourhoods to local and central government, drawing on knowledge from the ground, what works in the UK and internationally.

Saffron Woodcraft is responsible for the Young Foundation's work on neighbourhoods. She manages the new Neighbourhood Futures project which brings together a consortium of local authority partners to explore the impacts of the economic downturn on the future of neighbourhood working and community empowerment, and a new project exploring solutions to entrenched deprivation in very small estates.

Saffron has carried out a wide range of research and a number of practical projects exploring neighbourhoods and innovation, including research about the future role of ward councillors for Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and understanding local social innovation for NESTA. Saffron also worked with mySociety to develop and launch fixmystreet.com, a website allowing people to report problems in their neighbourhood direct to their local council. She is developing a new workstream using Social Network Analysis to support innovation in neighbourhood working.