

## Briefing paper

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Introduction by John  
Penrose MP



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# Taking back control of our streets

The case for community-powered planning



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## Endorsements

*Britain needs more good housing at prices that ordinary people on normal incomes can afford. One way we can boost this supply is by unleashing the considerable potential of self-build, currently held back by over-complicated planning rules. Self-commissioned houses are almost invariably better built, greener and cost less to run - they are also warmly welcomed in their communities. By giving local people more control over the rules in their own area, we can bring back this British tradition, now popular and proven across the world.*

### **Richard Bacon MP**

*Right now, housebuilding is dominated by a handful of large developers, but it is the smaller builders who are best at delivering the homes that locals want and need on brownfield land. Community-powered planning policy, as proposed in this paper, would unlock thousands of jobs for small builders and ensure the right homes are built in the right place.*


### **Jo Gideon MP**

*Building more homes is often seen as controversial, as local communities view planning and development as something done to them, not for them, or with them. This paper shows that more local control could catalyse support for future development, so long as it is done in a sympathetic and collaborative manner, empowering local residents to make meaningful choices about the future of the area they live in.*

### **James Grundy MP**

*When it comes to housing, communities themselves are the experts. This paper sets out how to build the homes we need by empowering local people to determine the development that is right for their neighbourhood.*

### **Sally-Ann Hart MP**



*We need to build more homes where people want to live. Too many Brits are forced to move far from their family and community to get on the housing ladder. However, housebuilding must also enhance places. This proposal offers a way to build and build beautiful by retaining local control and harnessing community power.*

### **Miriam Cates MP**

*This paper sets out a range of compelling ways that we can give communities a greater say in local development and ensuring they remain beautiful places to live. In particular, the recommendations would help ensure residents have a stronger democratic right in stopping tall towers from being imposed upon their community.*

### **Dean Russell MP**

## Acknowledgements

With thanks to Ed Wallis, Matthew Smith and Imogen Sinclair for their editorial care, to Ben Southwood for his advice, and to Nicholas Boys Smith, David Milner and the Create Streets team for their design work. Finally, our thanks to John Penrose MP for championing community-led development in Parliament.



*Locality supports local community organisations to be strong and successful. Our national network of 1,400 members helps hundreds of thousands of people every week. We offer specialist advice, peer learning and campaign with members for a fairer society. Together we unlock the power of community.*



*Established in 2021 by Miriam Cates MP and Danny Kruger MP, the New Social Covenant Unit exists to share an old-new set of ideas in British politics. We believe that the primary purpose of public policy should be to strengthen families, communities, and the nation: the associations that make individuals happy, safe and free. Given the unique threats and opportunities of our age we need a 'new social covenant' for the 21st century.*



*Create Streets exists to help develop and steward beautiful and popular 'gentle density' places which residents and neighbours can love for generations. For people, prosperity and planet.*

# Taking back control of our streets

## Introduction

It is well established that building more homes is one of the most pressing challenges facing our country. People need high quality opportunities to live in the places they choose, get on the housing ladder and raise their families.

However, this goal is sometimes held to be at odds with the desire we all have to protect the places we hold dear. Too often, development is seen to be ill-judged, damaging to the countryside and to the fabric of our communities.

We believe this is a false dichotomy. We can and should have it both ways: building the homes we need and enhancing pride in places that people cherish. We can do this through community power: supporting the creative and innovative instincts of local people to decide the right places for the right homes.

Now is the time for a Conservative government to embed principles of community-powered conservatism in housing and planning. We can achieve both conservation and innovation by following our proud history of trusting the people, their affections and intuitions, to know what's best.

We have huge precedent to build on in this endeavour: the success of Neighbourhood Planning. Thousands of communities have taken the opportunity to shape the important development in their area, allocating sites for housing and protecting green space. Neighbourhood Planning demonstrates community power in practice and the benefits of local control.

So as the Government develops its strategy for levelling up and regeneration, there is a big opportunity to build on this direction of travel toward greater devolution and trusting the people to steward local places.

**John Penrose MP**

## Summary of recommendations

This paper outlines three ways to do this:

### Give communities more control over how they develop

1. **We recommend an extension of neighbourhood planning to give communities more powers.** We want to build on the success of neighbourhood planning to see measures that would give local communities more power over development near them. This means allowing streets to opt in to changes that would benefit them while setting design codes. This is known as street votes.

### Embed community stewardship

2. **We recommend that existing legislation be clarified so that authorities can choose the best uses for their land.** Local authorities ought to consider factors beyond price when selling land, allowing them to lean into the inclinations of the local community, to sell to those that would most benefit the community, rather than just to those who have the greatest resources to pay for it.
3. **We recommend that government build community stewardship with a national Community Ownership Strategy.** This could build on the Community Ownership Fund, making it as accessible as possible to the areas most in need of levelling up, and providing consistent policy support, including a new 'Community Right to Own', strengthening the existing Community Right to Bid.
4. **Government should ensure there are healthy governance institutions at the neighbourhood level so that power 'sticks' to local communities.** This can be done by designating a range of local institutions - parish and town councils, Neighbourhood Forums, existing community anchor organisations and new community alliances - that could gain access to a menu of newly devolved powers.

### Encourage developers to build the best homes.

5. **We recommend changes to our planning framework and building regulations that would encourage developers to build homes that people want, with empirical links to health**

**and wellbeing.** We believe, supported by a wealth of evidence, that people like living in houses on streets and squares with ample greenery and safety. Government can do more to make such streets and squares easier to build.

### **Levelling up street by street**

The new planning rules that we propose in this paper will serve the levelling up agenda because the very nature of levelling up is local. As the Prime Minister said when defining the government's flagship idea: though talent is evenly spread across the country, opportunity is not. Where we live has direct consequences for the paths we are able to pursue, and so levelling up will only happen neighbourhood by neighbourhood.

Yet when it comes to policy solutions, the instincts of government tend towards centralisation, even when particular leaders spearhead initiatives in the other direction. This is not the best way to unlock local potential. Unnecessary centralisation bakes in bureaucracy and red tapes the talent and commitment that exists in every neighbourhood. What's more, it presumes Whitehall knows best, when local people have a much clearer understanding of both the problems their places face and the strengths they have to solve them.

Levelling up can't happen from the top down. It needs to grow from the ground up, building on local pride and community spirit. Community power should be the thread that runs through the levelling up agenda.

### **A brief history of planning**

The English planning system was introduced by the postwar Labour Government in 1947. Under this system, the major decisions about where building should take place are made by local planning authorities. However, central governments have tended to maintain that local authorities fail to permit enough housing, and so have created additional mechanisms by which to do so. The key postwar example of this was the 'New Towns' system, under which the central government appropriated tracts of countryside, withdrew them from local authority control, and master-planned modernist new towns on the sites. After the initial wave, successive governments have explored building further new towns, but these schemes have not always ended in success.<sup>1</sup> Central governments have thus sought alternative ways of increasing housing supply.

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<sup>1</sup> Pennington, Mark. 'Property Rights, Public Choice & Urban Containment: A Study of the British Planning System'. London School of Economics and Political Science, 1997. <http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/view/creators/Pennington=3AMark=3A=3A.html>.



Today, local authorities are required to deliver a certain number of units through a mechanism known as the 'housing needs assessment'. Local authorities then determine where this housing will be built through the allocations system, determining which places will be released for development. This can be a fraught process. If they fail to release enough sites, their rights to manage development are largely suspended, resulting in a development free-for-all. Some developers have taken advantage of this and built large schemes which would otherwise not be approved, creating dormitories rather than communities.

The planning system plays a vital role in addressing pressures that earlier generations did not face to the same extent, like urban sprawl and congestion. Institutions like the Planning Inspectorate perform a crucial 'umpiring' role, reassuring residents that the buck must eventually stop somewhere.


However, some features of the current system have caused deep unease. Communities can feel that development is something done to them rather than something they can shape. The system can do a very poor job of asking local people what kinds of places they want, and delivering it. It can create fear and uncertainty for many, with a lack of incentives for communities to embrace positive change and a lack of genuine choice about the type and numbers of houses, failing to honour the differences between areas.

To address this, in the last decade a Conservative Government introduced neighbourhood planning. Neighbourhood planning has shown that giving people the power to plan results in not only better designed places, but more housing growth to meet local needs than would have been the case with the local plan alone.<sup>2</sup> It does this because it gives people the power to say what new development should look like and where it should go, rather than having it imposed on them in ways that don't meet their aspirations for their neighbourhoods. It means communities can shape the right development in the right places, something that the traditional planning system has struggled to achieve. This policy innovation provides a clear evidence base for the benefits of community-powered planning and impetus to go further along this path.

Frustrations are also felt by people who wish to build their own home (rather than accept a cookie-cutter design from some large developer) with a shortage of small sites with suitable infrastructure. Other countries cater much better for the demand for self-build, which also helps small builders to thrive. Other countries have also fostered higher levels of community-led housing where people

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<sup>2</sup> MHCLG (2020) *Impacts of Neighbourhood Planning in England*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-research-on-the-impacts-of-neighbourhood-planning>



come together to provide for the needs of their own community. In England, community led housing has shown that things can be different with an emphasis on good design and a willingness to build on sites that are not considered to be viable by developers. Community-led housing providers have often won over local support because people understand how they are meeting the needs of the local area and safeguarding community access to these assets over the long-term. Together with an attention to design quality this can incentivise communities to say 'yes'. Community-led providers have also shown how they can build support amongst landowners who see the value of meeting local community needs. The same is true of neighbourhood planning, where communities have shown that they are not anti-development, they are against the wrong *sort* of development.

Community-led providers are building well-designed homes, often based on local design codes. This is because the projects involve local people in a meaningful way. Community-led housing providers also tend to be committed to building to high environmental standards. New research commissioned by the National CLT Network indicates that community-led housing groups significantly exceed national minimum requirements. The Government's Building Better Building Beautiful Commission noted in its final report that community-led housing groups are 'excellent at delivering places that people like and value' and recommended that 'the government should continue to support community-led development [including] ongoing funding support for community housing projects, with a sensible long-term commitment, such as for the next five years'. The Leveling Up White Paper also stresses the centrality of community-led projects to regeneration.

When we get the process wrong, we also get the outcome wrong. Local people choose better housing - that's why we need to put them in control.

The economics of planning can also disempower local people. Gains are often privatised, with the costs falling on local communities and councils. Local people believe that the benefits of development are concentrated among a small number of landowners and developers, rather than being shared with the communities on whom the costs of new development fall. They see the development of tiny flats for new residents rather than larger homes for their own growing families, or to allow them to accommodate frail parents. Families want to stay local, but new housing often is not built for them.

The modernist developments of the postwar period are now no-

torious for their insensitivity to the needs and aspirations of their inhabitants: families with children were moved into tower blocks, urban communities were 'decanted' to mono-use satellite towns with few jobs, and people across the country found themselves in homes and neighbourhoods built in demonstrably unpopular architectural styles. There has been some improvement since, but our development system continues to rely heavily upon high-rise brownfield, mono-use greenfield, and 'iconic' interventions from famous starchitects. It still struggles to create popular places with demonstrably positive effects on the health and wellbeing of those who live in them.

### **The beginnings of change**

This Government has committed to going further and faster on giving more control to local settlements. The 2019 manifesto set out an 'ambition for full devolution across England'. The Prime Minister has built on this across a series of speeches defining levelling up, making it clear that devolution must be central to its success:

There is an even more radical shift we need to deliver this and I have seen myself the changes that you can bring about in towns and cities and regions, when local people have more of a say over their own destinies.

However, devolution per se will not necessarily mean more powerful communities. The Commission on the Future of Localism was convened by Locality and Power to Change in 2018.<sup>3</sup> It brought together a cross party panel of politicians, academics, local authority and community leaders, chaired by Lord Kerslake. The Commission sought to review the impact of the Localism Act and make recommendations on how to reinvigorate the localism agenda post-Brexit.

The Commission found that, so far, devolution has tended to shift centralisation from Whitehall to regional combined authorities. Power has not continued to flow onwards to local neighbourhoods.

This is the step levelling up needs to take. There is a strong case for expanding devolution into more areas, so all regions have the opportunity to benefit from the dynamic local leadership deals and metro mayors have brought. But as well as widening the breadth of devolution, we must simultaneously increase its depth, pushing power out of government at all levels and into the heart of our neighbourhoods.

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<sup>3</sup> Locality (2018) *People Power*, Available at: <https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/LOCALITY-LOCALISM-REPORT-1.pdf>

The experience of the pandemic has demonstrated just how powerful our communities can be. Community organisations have been our frontline of defence. They coordinated volunteer efforts, kept isolated groups connected, and delivered emergency supplies, often mobilising far quicker than the public sector. Relationships, connection, local knowledge and trust: deep and nuanced networks which have built up over years have proved their worth a thousand times over during the crisis. As one community organisation put it: 'we were built for this'.<sup>4</sup>

We've known for some time that people want more control. The Brexit vote was the clearest, most seismic expression of this, but it's something we see in poll after poll.<sup>5</sup> Covid-19 has only heightened the demand for change and given a clear demonstration of what can happen when communities take charge.

In recent years, there has been growing pressure for change when it comes to housing and planning. In 2019 the Government convened the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, chaired by the late Sir Roger Scruton. The Commission argued for communities to have more control over the form of development near them, as well as redressing biases in the current system against the popular sustainable urbanism that was once traditional in Britain. These proposals were met with broad support from across the political spectrum, and *Living with Beauty*, the Commission's report, is now viewed with intense interest internationally.

The debate about planning has often been seen as a simple opposition. On the one side, there is the Government's aim of building more homes. On the other, there are a range of concerns about improving the quality of new homes. A core theme of this paper is that this opposition is a false one. Focusing solely on driving more units through the allocations system is not only damaging, but counterproductive and politically unsustainable. Instead, we make the case for win-win answers. It is only through empowering communities that we can create conditions for sustainable development in England, a worthy bequest to future generations.

The golden thread running through all of these problems is the vital need to recognise the importance of community. This paper suggests some ways that the planning system could be improved to take better account of the concerns of local people, for their families and communities- so that development is done better, works better, and is hence more popular.

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<sup>4</sup> Locality (2020) *We Were Built for This*, Available at: <https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/We-were-built-for-this-Locality-2020.06.13.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> For example, recent polling for Power To Change and The Cares Family found 71% of us say we have 'no' or 'not much' control over important decisions that affect our neighbourhoods and local communities.

## Give communities more control over how they develop

Neighbourhood plans have been an invaluable tool to help bring democracy forward in planning by giving communities power to direct and shape growth. They have also been very successful in promoting regeneration and employment, enterprise and economic diversification; securing housing that reflects local need; bringing forward more housing than would otherwise have been the case; and protecting locally-valued green spaces.

The Localism Commission concluded that the Community Rights introduced in 2011 were useful – but not enough had been done to support people to use them, or to fundamentally shift the balance of power. It highlighted Neighbourhood Planning as the biggest success story. This was one of the only Community Rights with real statutory weight and a funded support programme. Consequently, it has been the most widely used and is widely considered as a key means of building community power.

Communities have clearly recognised these benefits, indicated by the impressive take up of neighbourhood plans with well over a thousand plans and thousands more in development. It is also clear that groups have a long-term commitment to the plans, evidenced by the fact that many update their plans according to the ever-changing local and national context. Neighbourhood plans are here to stay.

However, assembling the required extensive evidence base, although it can often give a rewarding account of the special character and history of the area, often makes neighbourhood plans time-consuming and costly. This can mean take up is higher in wealthier areas with more resources and more time and usually undertaken by older residents, despite other areas having just as strong an interest in their neighbourhood's important features. In some cases, neighbourhood plans are simply ignored in granting permission despite the clearly expressed wishes of the community, leaving them with little recourse other than expensive judicial review.

Like any initiative, neighbourhood plans could be strengthened by giving them greater statutory weight so that policies are given due regard in decision making. This can be remedied in part through ensuring Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) are adequately

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resourced. Take-up could be further improved by strengthening the LPA duty to support groups and by introducing more targeted support to urban and disadvantaged areas.

Street votes could also be introduced to build on the successes of neighbourhood planning and extend them further.

Street votes and neighbourhood plans are complementary, not contradictory. Street votes are a hyper-local form of the neighbourhood plan. Neighbourhood plans should play a role in establishing the overall strategic design guidance, ensuring that streets which don't opt for street votes remain protected, while at the same time providing a platform for those that want to pursue street votes.

Bringing in local people at the first stage of the development process allows them to adapt development to their needs, and not 'housing need' as judged by the algorithms of a remote and faceless system. This would mean places could adapt to new working patterns after Covid and new communications technology. Or they might adjust for local culture and make space for multi-generational households with appropriate extensions, including 'granny flats' for parents and grandparents.

### *Recommendation One*

*We recommend an extension of neighbourhood planning to include street votes.*

Street votes would allow residents of a single street or block to agree and set a design code for that street or block. They would thereby have the power to take control of development on their street, from extensions to larger projects. This proposal was recommended by Sir Roger Scruton in *Living with Beauty*, the report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission. In his view it had great promise as a means of starting to restore traditional streets and urbanism. It also alligns with the Government's stated promise to make patterns of development provably popular.

Such a street-level plan would allow residents to take over the stewardship of their own area: to ensure that traditional terraces are not disfigured with impolite and inappropriate additions, and that suburbia is not disrupted with unsympathetically designed concrete blocks of flats imposed into quiet streets of attractive family houses. Where they believe that graceful extensions can enhance a street, they can permit that; on some streets, they may

choose to be more ambitious.

Of course, such plans would have to be subject to careful rules to protect neighbours and those living on nearby, streets such as respect privacy and ensure access to light. Street votes must not come at the expense of important checks and balances that the planning system has in place.

There must be generous provision of infrastructure and new development must not create more congestion. But subject to such conditions, we believe that the overwhelming majority would welcome the opportunity to have more say in development close to where they live, on their own street. Two-thirds of British people say that they would be more likely to support homebuilding if local residents had the power to agree when they were confident it would benefit their community.<sup>6</sup> The experience of neighbourhood planning bears this out. In the same way, street votes can ensure that the street is enhanced, not degraded, and help ensure local families' housing needs are met.

Street votes could also help to diversify the range of communities who engage with neighbourhood planning.

Currently, plans are disproportionately concentrated in more affluent and rural areas meaning the benefits are not spread evenly across England. Disadvantaged areas can lack infrastructure such as gathering places and funds such as the parish precept. Lower levels of participation in civic matters are associated with the population profile of poorer areas due to a range of issues such as poor health, short term residence, negative experiences of public bodies and lack of confidence. Such areas can also lack control over the expenditure of the Neighbourhood Proportion of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), which parished areas benefit from.

Street votes, by generating many more small sites, could help community-led housing providers, councils and Housing Associations provide affordable and social housing, maintaining the social mix that is such a celebrated part of British cities. And by delivering extra homes, with the supply controlled by locals, it is likely to improve options for people buying or renting a home. Many of these new homes will be in leafy suburbs, and within walking distance of open and green space.

The pandemic demonstrated - the closer you live to a green space, the happier and healthier you are.<sup>7</sup> Nearly three million people do not live within a ten minute walk from a park.<sup>8</sup>

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6 Adam Smith Institute (2021), *Build me up, level up*, Available at: <https://www.adamsmith.org/research/build-me-up-level-up>

7 Warwick University, *Green space is good for your mental health – the nearer the better!*, (2019), Available at: [https://warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/pressreleases/green\\_space\\_is/](https://warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/pressreleases/green_space_is/)

8 Fields in Trust, Green Space Index, Available at: <http://fieldsintrust.org/green-space-index>

## Embed community stewardship

Stewardship played a crucial role in traditional landowning. Farming families took care of their land for generations, perhaps adding cottages where they judged it appropriate. The owners of Georgian Bath or London's Pimlico could have boosted profit on any given house by maximising rentable floor space while minimising build costs, but doing so would destroy the value of every other property in sight of it. As a result, they carefully curated each property with a view to preserving and enhancing the value of the neighbourhoods as a whole. Other neighbourhoods in unified ownership do so still.

Cadbury's Bourneville and Rowntree's Clifton estate are examples of stewardship inherent in philanthropic vision. Today - with more fractured ownership, community power can go some way to achieving the same stewardship.

The essence of stewardship is a willingness to forego immediate financial gain as part of a longer-term investment in a place's value. Stewardship is not driven by narrow financial gain but takes a rounded view of what makes a great place to live. Neighbourhood plans are a form of stewardship, allowing communities to shape how many homes are built in their area, where they go and what they look like. Community-led housing is another form of stewardship, often resulting in developments that would not be seen as profitable enough for other developers, but are nonetheless valued by the community. They are often exemplars of design with homes and landscapes the wider community are proud of and with a value placed on energy efficiency. Such plans and developments often allocate land for homes across the income spectrum and ensure the housing can meet local needs in perpetuity through community ownership.

Today, stewardship places an emphasis on community assets and facilities such as parks and thriving local high streets that ensure places are more than the sum of their individual homes. Places that provide a range of facilities and social infrastructure can create opportunities for a diverse range of people to come together.

The government has shown commitment to community ownership by introducing the Community Ownership Fund. This offers the opportunity to build community stewardship across the country. However, the first round of the Community Ownership Fund was not in line with the government's levelling up ambitions. Short timescales, a strict 50/50 'match' requirement, and a tight £250,000 upper limit, have made it easier for affluent communities to access,



and created additional barriers for disadvantaged areas.

The Levelling Up White Paper made clear the government intended to 'learn lessons from the first bidding round to maximise the impact of the fund'. And while some of the key design challenges remain, significant improvements have been made to introduce flexibility and adjust timescales to bring more potential projects into scope. We hope the fund will become as patient and developmental as possible, to support the places which will benefit most from this investment.

However, turbo-charging community ownership will require more than funds. We need a national strategy for community ownership. This should include a new 'Community Right to Own', strengthening the existing Community Right to Bid, so that potential community owners have first refusal when Assets of Community Value come up for sale, with a one-year moratorium for communities to mobilise and fundraise for purchase.

This commitment to community ownership can form part of a much more comprehensive approach to community power. Too often piecemeal powers or short-term funds are made available, without building the long-term local infrastructure required to use them. As such, they tend to bounce off all but the most affluent places, and the cycle of disadvantage that holds places back continues unabated.

To change this, we need healthy governance institutions at the neighbourhood level, to ensure that power 'sticks' to local communities. People come together in a range of different ways, which will often be organic, disorganised and ad hoc. However, for this informal power to find true expression, there needs to be the formal governance infrastructure in place to strengthen community voice, give local people real decision-making power and provide tangible routes for achieving change.

The Localism Commission examined our existing arrangements and found there are common challenges faced by both traditional institutions (such as parish councils) and newer forms of community-led governance (such as Neighbourhood Forums).<sup>9</sup> These include: lack of economic control; decisions blocked from above; and reluctance of other public bodies to embrace the perceived risks of devolution. The Commission also found clear internal challenges for local governance: lack of new leadership; partisan interests overriding commitment to place; lack of broad and deep participation; and inability to effectively engage the community.

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<sup>9</sup> Locality (2018) *People Power*, Available at: <https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/LOCALITY-LOCALISM-REPORT-1.pdf>

Government could therefore strengthen neighbourhood governance to give local people meaningful control over important things that happen in their neighbourhoods. They could designate a range of governance institutions at the neighbourhood level including parish and town councils as well as Neighbourhood Forums created through neighbourhood planning, existing community anchor organisations and new community alliances.

This will enable neighbourhood governance to reflect the contours of every place, including unparished places. In many areas, a parish council will be the right way to do this, but they won't be felt appropriate everywhere and have struggled to gain footholds in urban areas. So it is important to have a range of options that build on the assets that already exist in our local communities, rather than imposing new structures from the centre.

While there is no 'one size fits all' local governance model, whether community-led or a more traditional council, they would all have to deliver genuine local democratic accountability. For instance, a new community-level decision making institution (such as 'Community Covenants' described in the Levelling Up White Paper) would have to show it was fulfilling specific conditions, overseen by a Commissioner or local authority, so it was properly accountable to the entire community. Once designated, these local institutions should be able to access a range of new powers and resources—across local economic development, service provision, community assets, planning and housing.

A new sense of community stewardship will amplify and support the pride and attachment residents feel for their local places.

Developments that do not align with local aspirations may be one reason why local home owning communities in leafy suburban areas take such a dim view of threats to cherished green belt. It is also why more urban communities have such a firm perspective on the 'blue belt'—the skyline. Many residents in market towns with vibrant communities often do not want to become commuter towns without vitality: they want family homes to invest in the future of the community. The planning process can feel opaque and Byzantine to local people. There is too little transparency around what exactly the housing targets are and why houses are planned for certain places. From that perspective, community-powered planning could be an important tool for building confidence in development.

While local authorities may wish to be good stewards of their land,

taking the long-term view and standing up for the 'place value' of the neighbourhood as a whole, developers can run rings around councils. Councils can be hampered by Treasury rules that compel them, when disposing of land, to achieve the maximum possible financial price, neglecting one of the most important aspects of value: what will be done with that land, and whether that will improve or harm the places around it. They cannot release land, as authorities in other countries do, in order to let local people themselves, decide how to use it.

*Recommendation Two*

*We recommend that existing legislation be clarified so that authorities can choose the best uses for their land.<sup>10</sup>*

This could include furthering the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, supporting community-led housing and other community ownership goals, furthering the Neighbourhood Plan, and other policy objectives that enhance the wellbeing of current and future generations. The new use of the land should ensure that local people see the benefits: they must be confident that such new use will improve their area.

Indeed, the Government might consider going further by placing a statutory duty on English councils and Homes England to secure the optimal uses of their land for those purposes.

*Recommendation Three*

*We recommend that government build community stewardship with a national Community Ownership Strategy.*

This could build on the Community Ownership Fund, making it as accessible as possible to the areas most in need of levelling up, and providing consistent policy support, including a new 'Community Right to Own', strengthening the existing Community Right to Bid.

*Recommendation Four*

*Government should also ensure there are healthy governance institutions at the neighbourhood level so that power 'sticks' to local communities.*

This can be done by designating a range of local institutions - parish and town councils, Neighbourhood Forums, existing community anchor organisations and new community alliances—that could

<sup>10</sup> This means allowing 'best consideration' to encompass optimal use in a broader sense, rather than simply financially most rewarding

gain access to a menu of newly devolved powers.

### Encourage developers to build the best homes

Community stewardship values not just how buildings look but how buildings connect to each other, including opportunities for walking or cycling for happier, healthier towns and cities that are more resilient to external shocks.

England has a long tradition of creating resilient places. From medieval York through to immense Victorian cities like Manchester and Leeds, England has created places that are the envy of the world. Some towns and parts of our cities have long been admired for their beauty—and today they draw tourists from all over the world.

In recent decades, however, an extensive body of empirical research has shown that the value of traditional street-based urbanism goes far beyond this. Terraced streets, private gardens, mixes of uses and richly patterned architecture are now recognised to have positive effects on the health and wellbeing of their inhabitants, as well as being more popular and more environmentally sustainable.

Create Streets identified 67 studies that found some link between high-rise living and negative health outcomes.<sup>11</sup> One study found that—even controlling for socioeconomic status—those living in high-rise blocks suffered from more mental health difficulties.<sup>12</sup> Street trees and appropriate greenery improve wellbeing, and nearby small areas of greenery are vastly more impactful than large areas some distance away.<sup>13</sup>

Traditional streets have evolved through learning, over generations, what works best. They offer people the chance to enjoy visually complex facades and enticing shop fronts. They offer the chance of discovering new things around curves and corners, or the opportunity of encounters with friends and neighbours.

Part of what has gone wrong with development in England is that, with honourable exceptions, we have forgotten how to build this way. After the Second World War, attracted by and, in some cases, misinterpreting Le Corbusier and other modernist theoreticians, planners decided that tower blocks dotted in green spaces were the proper form of the modern city. To that end, endless square miles of finely grained historic urban streets and fabric were lost forever, and a modernist 'urban landscape' began to rise from their ruins.

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<sup>11</sup> Boys Smith, N. (2019), *Heart in the Right Street: Beauty, happiness and health in designing the modern city*

<sup>12</sup> Fanning, D. (1967), 'Families in flats' in *British Medical Journal*, 18, pp. 382–386.

<sup>13</sup> Boys Smith, N. (2019), *Ibid*

Much of this poor development resulted from the culture of the 'planner knows best', with development done to communities, not by communities. The route to better development begins with putting the community in the driving seat, and we are seeing this in action with neighbourhood plans. By harnessing the power of community, neighbourhood plans are helping to reverse the trend of poorly designed places, through the preparation of design policies and guidance and codes which hold developers to account. More communities should be encouraged to take up this community right to create places that anyone would be proud to call home.

Government have done much recently to build better, with the recent launch of the National Design Guide, the National Model Design Code and updates to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). All of this helps give more teeth to demand for better built and designed places. The fruits of this labour are already being borne out, with more planning application refusals coming forward on the grounds of design. However, more must be done. Many local authorities lack the necessary design expertise and confidence to push for better design. This results in subpar developments getting the green light.

A more design confident and resourced local authority, coupled with the recent improvements to planning legislation and guidance, will help lead to better designed places. It would mean that the power of communities to create better designed places could be truly realised, as local authorities would have the power and confidence to hold developers to the policies, guidance, codes and master plans contained within neighbourhood plans. It would also allow local authorities to produce more ambitious codes themselves.

We must build on this direction of travel to give developers incentives to build homes with empirically proven links to the health and wellbeing of their inhabitants.

*Recommendation Five*

*We recommend changes to our planning framework and building regulations:*

- Encourage tree planting and green spaces that are accessible to everyone in the community and minimise asphalt or tarmac which are unsightly and do not readily absorb rain.<sup>14</sup>
- Encourage walking, cycling and safe play that can be compatible with vehicular access.

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<sup>14</sup> Create Streets (2022), *The bin-lorry effect*

- Encourage opportunities for natural surveillance, with an animated street scene, that makes people feel safe and welcome.
- Encourage a mix of uses, removing the need for long journeys to live, work, socialise and shop.
- Encourage uncluttered pavements recognising that there are options beyond tarmac, such as the attractive stone paving that graces many of our own traditional streets.
- Discourage unsustainable, carbon-intensive concrete or plastic building facades that, where they are not flammable, often age and weather terribly until they disfigure the street rather than enhancing it.
- Encourage the use of new technologies and approaches if they too can deliver better places. While we should look to the principles that made historical development so popular and capable of standing the test of time, we should not stifle innovation.
- Put communities in the driving seat through neighbourhood plans and their associated guidance and codes.

## Conclusion

Many modern problems point in a similar direction. We wish to ensure a good future for the nation's children. We wish to protect and improve our built and natural heritage, including the environment. We wish to support the nation to become more active and healthier, through having nearby shops and other activities to walk to when it wishes. We wish to reduce crime and provide better opportunities, particularly for those who have few at present. We wish to have more trees and other greenery in our neighbourhoods.

We believe answers can be found in community power. If we trust the people, we can ensure that our national ambition to build more homes does not come at a community cost, but instead creates happy, healthy neighbourhoods. Rather than tightly planned from the centre, our streets are better created organically, through the activities of the local community, rather than imposed in great unsightly swathes by higher forces. Stewardship is key; and we must give local people the means to achieve it.





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