

## Community Futures - The Opportunity to Flourish

This essay argues that no single policy idea will turn ‘the most socially and economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods in England into thriving communities’ (Local Trust, 2024). To imply that one policy can have transformative impact ignores the wealth of research evidencing the complex and context dependent reality of neighbourhoods. This essay proposes that four broad policy changes at different scales, intersecting at the neighbourhood level, can give every neighbourhood the opportunity to thrive:

1. **Redistribute money to disadvantaged neighbourhoods** using a carbon tax, shared via a carbon dividend, and a Wealth Tax, shared via a Neighbourhood Wealth Fund;
2. **Make local government matter** through funding local government innovation, co-production, and community relationship building;
3. **Deliver power to ordinary people** through democratic self-government in neighbourhoods;
4. **Repeat.**

Before considering these policy shifts in detail we first need to think about what a ‘socially and economically disadvantaged neighbourhood’ is. A neighbourhood that is the subject of some policy is usually made up from, and affects, multiple communities and physical spaces. The people living in a neighbourhood will have diverse views about how to ‘define, claim and transform’ that neighbourhood (Whitehead, 2003, p288; see also Mansbridge, 1980).

Viewpoints will also differ between those within the neighbourhood and the policy makers, decision takers, and narrative shapers living outside it. Neighbourhoods, therefore, need to be made meaningful through democratic processes that give citizens influence over how a neighbourhood is defined and also gives them the power to meaningfully act together as that neighbourhood (Somerville et al, 2009).

A socially and economically disadvantaged neighbourhood is in that relative position because of policy decisions and socioeconomic changes at multiple scales. These can include: push and pull factors on people moving in and out of an area; the level of resources for local institutions and amenities; the availability and quality of local employment and housing; familial, social and economic resources and connections; as well as, people’s confidence in

being able to change and regulate their area. Most importantly for the question of policy change, evidence on neighbourhoods flourishing or declining points to multiple factors related to policy scales from the local to the global. A further complexity is that neighbourhood level factors are more relevant for some groups than others and will impact differently on outcomes depending on context. Changing struggling neighbourhoods into ones that are thriving is, therefore, a challenge that demands changes across policy areas at different scales (Somerville et al, 2009; Chyn and Katz, 2021).

The following four sections argue for multiple policy changes that will intersect within neighbourhoods, giving every citizen within those neighbourhoods an opportunity to flourish, increasing the opportunity for neighbourhoods to thrive.

## **1. Redistribute money to disadvantaged neighbourhoods.**

The cross-generational social and health harms caused by poverty and income inequality are the biggest obstacle to thriving neighbourhoods (Marmot, 2005; Strelitz and Lister, 2008, Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). Citizens are struggling to afford the basics even when they are in paid employment, whilst funding for public assets and services has been declining for over a decade (see below). Every neighbourhood has assets to build upon but struggling neighbourhoods have fewer assets to handle pressing challenges, such as hate driven by social media, the cost-of-living crisis, and extreme weather events. Redistributing money will increase the resources available to struggling neighbourhoods. This will be the bedrock upon which neighbourhoods and citizens can build and flourish.

The first redistributive policy will be a Carbon Tax, widely thought to be one of the most effective levers for tackling the climate crisis. Coupled with a Carbon Dividend (a Universal Basic Income), this policy would be expected to gain broad support (Sommer et al, 2022, see also [www.econstatement.org](http://www.econstatement.org)) with the Carbon Dividend expected to reduce poverty and income inequality, given the relationship between wealth and carbon consumption in the UK (see Fremstad and Paul, 2019; Baltrusiewicz et al, 2023). Some citizens might need additional directed support; for example, people who are disabled and rely on personal transport for mobility (see Pitkänen et al, 2021). Alongside redistribution, this policy will act to tackle a global challenge that is faced at every scale, including in neighbourhoods.

Whilst individual level redistribution is important, a Carbon Dividend will not facilitate activity at the neighbourhood level. This will be achieved through the creation of Neighbourhood Wealth Funds covering every neighbourhood in the country, funded by a redistributive one-off Wealth Tax that would raise around £250 billion (see Advani et al, 2020). The size of a Neighbourhood Wealth Fund will be defined by the number of households in the neighbourhood and its use decided upon by that neighbourhood (see below). The level of the fund, around £15 million for 2,000 households, will give every neighbourhood the resources to invest for long-term and transformational change.

## **2. Make local government matter.**

Local government can be a platform for activity - from health and social care, to economic growth, to support for young people - that helps neighbourhoods thrive. The transformative role that local government can play in these areas has been demonstrated in multiple contexts and practices. These include: co-governing and co-producing with citizens as experts on their own needs and capabilities (Russell, 2020; Duggal et al, 2021); using the convening power of local-government to build place-based solutions across multiple public bodies, alongside collaborating with and devolving to the third-sector (Beer et al, 2020; Denham and Studdert, 2024); and building and strengthening relationships within communities (Cottam, 2018). In practical terms this includes: young parents being able to access a supportive playgroup just round the corner; young adults who are feeling rootless being connected with local business mentors who can offer employment; a person who has multiple disabilities being supported by and supporting other people in their neighbourhood. A reformed role for local government would create many policy innovations to give opportunities for people and neighbourhoods to thrive.

Over recent decades the power and resources of local government within England has been cut sharply at the same time as demand has increased (Ogden and Phillips, 2024). The continuation and expansion of a transformed role for local government would need more investment and autonomy (see above, also Carr-West, 2023). However, these changes would also lead to reduced spending in the departments of health, social-care, and justice as social problems were addressed (for example: Arvidson, 2014; Prunty et al, 2024).

### **3. Deliver power to ordinary people.**

To thrive, every neighbourhood needs to have the capacity to talk about ‘what neighbourhood should we make together?’ and, crucially, be able to act on that discussion. The defunding and amalgamation of local government has eroded the ability of communities to democratically articulate their own priorities and values. Local government at the principal authority scale is too large and remote to involve ordinary people as fully equal participants. Democratic innovations implemented by large-scale authorities tend to lack autonomy and power, as those in authority worry about giving away control (Barnes et al, 2007; McDonnell, 2020). Within England, the main structure of small-scale government is the parish and town council, which in some cases already provides a distinct form of autonomous local governance that can be a platform for citizen participation, organic place-based activity, and local discussion (Wills, 2016; Leman, 2023). Whether small-scale neighbourhood governance is facilitated through current parish and town council legislation, or through alternative neighbourhood councils (for example, Whitehead, 2003), or other structures (for example, [www.cooperationhull.co.uk](http://www.cooperationhull.co.uk)), should itself be a local conversation. The Neighbourhood Wealth Fund (see above), local precepts, and the double-devolution of assets and resources from principal authorities (Wills, 2016; Krasniqi et al, 2021) will give neighbourhood level governance structures the means to articulate and deliver the change citizens want to create (Somerville et al, 2009).

A caveat in this proposal is that whilst neighbourhoods can benefit from autonomy, the democratic bedrock of this autonomy has to be supported. Individuals within the democratic spaces of neighbourhood governance will need to accept the broad demands of respecting and including other residents as equals. This is another complex challenge given citizens in every neighbourhood vary in their capacity and willingness to engage democratically. Where significant decisions are made regarding neighbourhood resources, assets and services, every citizen needs to be given an equitable opportunity to hear specialist advice about, reflect on, discuss, consent to, and dissent from, that decision (Parkinson, 2006; Leman, 2023).

#### **4. Repeat (change builds on change).**

Both citizens and state are used to transactional, atomised and provider/recipient models of governance and services. This will take time to transform. As every neighbourhood has its own challenges and capabilities, there will be mistakes and missteps. Time will be needed for learning. This implies a need to shift from funding and evaluation focused on narrow short-term outputs to curating ongoing growth in neighbourhoods and understanding the long-term impact on citizen's lives (Cottam, 2018). As local government strengthens the autonomy and capacity of local civil and civic society, a stronger capacity in civic and civil society will strengthen the autonomy and capacity of local government. This process is well described by Rolfe (2006) as a "virtuous helix" of mutually supporting change. Redistributing money to citizens and neighbourhoods, investing in local government that works with people, and enabling citizens to act through neighbourhood scale government, will not automatically mean that all neighbourhoods will thrive. However, these policies will create more opportunities for thriving to happen over time.

### **Conclusion**

The challenges that impact the 'most socially and economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods in England' are multiple and intersecting. I reject the implication of a single 'policy idea' that will turn a neighbourhood of diverse experiences, capabilities and interests into one that is thriving (Local Trust, 2024). Instead, multiple policies need to be brought together that intersect at the neighbourhood level: policies that give every citizen a share in the wider wealth of the country simply because they are a citizen; policies that connect neighbours to each other and to people in public services; policies that enable every citizen to ask the question "what can we do together to make our lives better?" and be a valued part of meaningful actions to make "better" happen. Where these opportunities intersect, then the conditions will be in place for citizens to flourish, which will in turn support their engagement in creating a hopeful and thriving future, not just for neighbourhoods, but at every scale, from the personal to the planet.

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