

Just Neighbourhoods?

March 2025

The research team - Gavin Parker, Matthew Wargent, John Sturzaker and Tessa Lynn - penned a short response to the recently launched 'Plan for Neighbourhoods' asking how people will actually be involved...

On March 4th 2025 the UK Government issued its [Plan for Neighbourhoods](#), a setting out an approach for tackling longstanding issues in some of the UK's most deprived areas. This sits closely to the scope and focus of the *Just Neighbourhoods?* research project.

Overall, the plan appears a welcome move towards supporting the country's most deprived communities and moves away from the 'sink-or-swim' vision of localism which had prevailed since 2010. This period tended to benefit the least deprived neighbourhoods the most and did little to help an increasingly pressured local state.

The plan for neighbourhoods promises financial investment totalling £1.5 billion over a 10-year timeframe, with up to £20 million for each of the selected 75 neighbourhoods. This amounts to a significant injection of funds designed to regenerate physical infrastructure, repair fractured and mistrustful communities, and drive economic growth.

The proposals also include the creation of Neighbourhood Boards, whose key responsibility will be to develop Regeneration Plans. The prospective Boards will be made up of residents, businesses, grassroots campaigners, workplace representatives, faith, and community leaders. If handled well this represents an opportunity for genuine partnership working. The Plan contains some familiar phrases – “unlocking potential”, “taking back control”. The last decade or so has seen some advances in neighbourhood level policy, but [place-based inequality continues to be entrenched](#); so, whilst the proposals look ambitious and should be welcomed, there are notes of caution to be struck.

The finalised membership of the proposed Neighbourhood Boards and any proposals to alter place boundaries are to be submitted less than two months after the announcement was made public. The Just Neighbourhoods team view is that considerable work will need to be done to establish adequate governance structures at the neighbourhood level. There is a danger that representation and legitimacy in local governance may be sidelined in getting the plans established. To avoid being seen as another initiative led by local elites, the constitution of Neighbourhood Boards may need more effort to craft them appropriately and ensure that genuine partnerships are fostered.

There is some similarity with this new plan and the New Labour's New Deal for Communities, [a generally successful area-based initiative](#). However, with social ties being arguably weaker, the political landscape being more polarised, trust in experts lower, and support for public policy far more delicate, successful policy solutions in this environment are unlikely to be the same. Nonetheless, there are concrete lessons that we can learn from the New Deal for Communities. The size of population suggested by the prospectus' contends there should be no neighbourhoods under 20,000 people. This does not fit [most peoples' definition of a neighbourhood](#). Indeed, evaluations of the New Deal for Communities found that interventions lost local legitimacy at this population level. Careful decisions should be made about what constitutes a neighbourhood, and trying to get that balance right is a challenge: allowing communities to decide for themselves can entrench social divisions, yet imposing top-down definitions or limits can overlook how local people intuit their own neighbourhood. Above all, the Government must refrain from warm words about community engagement, if power is to actually lie with a new generation of neighbourhood managers.

Perhaps the biggest headache for the Deputy Prime Minister is a looming accountability gap. Angela Rayner introduced the Plan for Neighbourhoods, following a similarly ambitious [English Devolution White Paper](#) published in December 2024. The latter proposes a pretty radical reorganisation of local government that will increase the distance between local communities and their nearest level of local government. Most District and Borough Councils in England serve populations of 100,000-150,000, new Unitary Councils will cover populations of around half a million people. This gap will need to be filled by robust local structures and processes, possibly via reinvigorated Parish and Town Councils and, in urban areas, possibly through new neighbourhood forums. How the initial tranche of Neighbourhood Boards fits within this structure remains to be seen. Are they frontrunners for a future wider rollout or a targeted intervention in the most 'left behind' neighbourhoods?

Indeed, it is unclear how new Regeneration Plans, and indeed what may follow with devolution, will square with existing institutions and plans. In England, Neighbourhood Development Plans are already shaping planning decisions in nearly 3,000 communities. Parallel community-led indicatives, albeit of different stripes, exist in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Will these be built upon or left to wither on the vine? Such questions of policy may seem dry, but their impact will be felt in communities across the UK, many of whom have invested huge amounts of time and effort in community development activity across many years.

There are many other thorny issues with which a new neighbourhood-level policy must contend: we must avoid stigmatising 'left behind' place, ensure that local authorities actively and genuinely co-produce Regeneration Plans, prioritise implementation

alongside further plan-making, develop robust protocols that ensure fair process of issues and project identification, and consider how all this will be evaluated.

The Plan for Neighbourhoods seems a welcome start. It orients attention in the right direction, but as ever, the detail will be important in shaping its success and we should learn the lessons of the recent past or risk this opportunity being wasted. Further clues about how the neighbourhood scale is to be activated may lie both in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill and in the Devolution Bill expected shortly.

Note: a version of this article will appear in *The Planner* in March 2025.