

## Just Neighbourhoods?

April 2026

### 'Community-led' planning stories

Part of a series of concise accounts relating the experience of neighbourhoods ranked highly against the index of deprivation, where residents have engaged with 'community-led' planning.

#### **Stainforth, Doncaster - *"Planning for justice involves the protection of heritage"***

This story is based on the research we have conducted about Stainforth, a former mining village located near Doncaster. The Indices of Multiple Deprivation ranking for Stainforth places it in the top ten per cent overall for socio-economic deprivation.

People in Stainforth care deeply about their place. When the mines closed the area suffered significant unemployment. Residents want better opportunities for young people, improved quality of life, and a recognition and protection of their industrial heritage and community assets. Stainforth has two remaining colliery 'headstocks' that proudly stand on the edge of the town, they are regarded as powerful symbols of local history and identity. Very few former mining towns have retained such a visible statement of their past.



While the Hatfield pit stayed open until 2016, declining local employment meant the community no longer benefited from it as it once had. This left the area in a difficult position, missing out on Coalfields Regeneration Funding that supported other former pit communities. Today, people talk about feeling unheard, even unseen, by those making decisions about the town. For many, "injustice comes from not having a voice at the big tables" not because they are entirely excluded, but because being listened to can feel like a formality, with decisions already made before they were involved. This is especially important as the neighbourhood faces health inequalities and economic challenges. Residents query why people only a few miles down the road have significantly better health outcomes and life chances.

Over several years, a committed charity leader worked alongside residents and the Town Council to produce a neighbourhood plan, published in November 2024. The plan helped present community priorities in a way that developers and decision makers are required to consider. It was a significant achievement in itself and it has also contributed to Stainforth (via Doncaster City) being awarded Towns Fund money of £21.6million.

This seems good. You might hope so. Through the neighbourhood planning process, residents developed ambitious ideas to create a country park around the headstocks, turn them into an educational heritage centre and a hub for local artists. This led to a proposed Neighbourhood Development Order (NDO) place this on a formal footing. But it was outvoted by local councillors, who prioritised economic development and job creation. Soon after the publication of the Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP), and contrary to the aspirations initially featured in the NDO, a large warehouse was constructed between the community and the headstocks, accordingly this has provoked some resentment *“The warehouse is a monstrosity... when I open my blinds that’s what I see”*. A warehouse that has been unoccupied since it was built in 2024. The feeling that is left by the community, is that development happens to the town, not for it; not done with the community but done to it.

For many, the building has become a modern day ‘bund’ - a barrier separating the community from its heritage. Ironically, it is also understood that the warehouse requires only a few specialist workers, not from the community, and thus leaving the community questioning the ability of local councillors to judge whether decisions they make will actually have a positive impact on the local economy. It has also reinforced a painful message, one that initially motivated the community in the first place, that decisions about their future could still be made without them, even after years of planning effort. Community members who were instrumental in forming the neighbourhood plan and achieving the Towns Fund award, still do not feel included in decision making about how the investment is used.

There are important lessons here for communities facing similar challenges, and for those traditionally making decisions on their behalf:

- **Creating a neighbourhood plan does not automatically secure influence.** Communities need additional strategies to influence and sustain their voice.
- **Local knowledge is powerful.** Residents understand their place more deeply than external professionals. Their insights can identify priorities that genuinely sustain everyday life. Using community research tools to collate and present evidence helps reinforce community voice and knowledge in a credible way.
- **Tensions between economic growth and community priorities exist.** Being clear about community values, such as heritage, wellbeing, environment, opportunities, can help navigate such tensions. Alongside questioning who benefits from the growth? Does it improve access to good employment, opportunities and quality of life?
- **Relationships and supportive intermediaries are crucial.** Building support across councillors, council officers, supportive organisations and residents can help strengthen community power, but when challenges arise residents need support from people or organisations who are trusted.
- **Persistence matters.** Even when outcomes feel disappointing, community action still influences the way investment is spent, raises visibility and increases the chances of influencing future decision making.
- Local councillors and other decision makers, as well as residents themselves, could do better to understand **what actually helps improve** the local economy.

Most importantly, the Stainforth experience shows that people in so-called deprived and “left behind” neighbourhoods are not lacking in ambition or capability. They are already planning, caring and

imagining better futures. The question really is about whether the systems are aligned to facilitate their efforts and insights and are ready to trust them or work in genuine partnership.