

Convene, Capacity Build, Coordinate: A neighbourhood working playbook for local government

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ICON Working Paper

The Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods

The Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (ICON) was launched with the support of the Minister for Local Growth in September 2024. The Commission aims to address the significant challenges faced in England's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods and how tackling them could generate significant social and economic improvements in the lives that live in them. The initiative aims to build on existing research, generate new insights and propose concrete actions that could improve the lives and prospects of people living in these areas.

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What is the playbook?

In our initial phase, the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (ICON) has largely focused on making the case for national government to 'think neighbourhoods' to unlock resources and develop supportive policies. However, we know that local government is critical to helping neighbourhoods recover and as that continues to develop it is important that local government bodies are supported to consider their role in neighbourhood working.

While this is particularly timely for those places that have been given funding through the Pride of Place, our rationale that thriving neighbourhoods improve outcomes and lives for local people applies everywhere, and the challenges faced by local government are also shared across the country.

This paper is not a prescriptive plan for how to engage with these initiatives or operate at neighbourhood level more generally. Instead, it sets out ICON's learning for local governments in England on how to support neighbourhoods through empowering local people. Ultimately, each council will have to find its own way to work with local residents, but there are principles that we believe are useful for all councils to consider as they listen and respond to local needs.

This paper is primarily for local government officers to operate with a renewed focus on neighbourhoods, providing a basis from which to support renewal at the local level through their role as convenors, coordinators and capacity builders. However, there are some lessons that may be useful to elected councillors too.

We have engaged extensively with local government throughout our work and we would like to thank everyone that has spoken to us and shared their expertise and opinions. This playbook reflects ICON's research and engagement, but draws on the input of those across the sector.

Introduction

There has been a growing acknowledgement among central government and policymakers that neighbourhoods are an important lens through which to view and deliver policy interventions. At ICON we have set out a clear theory for change: policy interventions and resources delivered strategically at the neighbourhood level, with local people involved in the delivery, building social capital, which in turn creates the conditions for stronger public services and long term economic redevelopment.

In our main report, *No Short Cuts*, we laid out this approach through a 'Staircase' Model of neighbourhood recovery.

Figure 1 – The 'Staircase Model' for neighbourhood recovery



Source: ICON analysis

We also laid out how the need for a new approach for neighbourhood regeneration, focusing on concentrating resources; building step by step in partnership with community-led institutions and focusing on foundation interventions rather than short-term outputs. A summary is in the table below:

Table 1 – ‘Old’ approach to neighbourhood recovery versus ‘new’ approach

Old Approach	New Approach
Spreading resources across all communities	Concentration of resources based on need
One-off programmes and interventions	Step by step approach through building bridging and bonding social capital through community-led social infrastructure
State-led	Community-led
Focus on outputs	Focus on foundations

Change cannot come from central government alone. It requires mobilisation and input from communities themselves and local government has a critical role in allowing for that mobilisation to take place.

Local authorities are key stakeholders who hold relationships, power and insights in places which can enable them to effectively build social capital and infrastructure and improve the lives of local people.

At a time when local government continues to face increasing pressure on their budgets and statutory services, local authorities continue to look for ways to work differently, to save money and deliver more effective services for less. By working more closely with communities and local partners as a convener and coordinator, supporting their neighbourhoods to build their own capacity, neighbourhood working offers a means to address some of these challenges at the local level. We have heard from a range of local authorities grappling with these challenges, and examples of ways that they are embracing place based and neighbourhood working to meet them. Some of these will be outlined in this paper.

National government is continuing to think neighbourhoods, with programmes such as Pride in Place, increased investment in neighbourhood policing and health. Local government is well placed to respond to this shift, as locally rooted institutions often with deeper roots in the communities they serve than at the national level.

This will look different in different places and for different tiers of government. In some places, there will already be an established way of working with communities on a neighbourhood scale, co-located services or funding for VCS organisations to deliver with residents. In others, business as usual statutory service delivery will outweigh other priorities, and there will be less scope for local authorities to play a direct role in neighbourhood working without significant support. Some areas will have begun developing plans as part of the rollout of Pride in Place.

The purpose of this paper is not to provide a prescriptive framework by which all local governments should engage in building social capital in their areas. Instead, it will outline the core principles for local authorities to consider, along with some examples, for how they can operate in the context of an increased focus on neighbourhood working, and why this can be beneficial for communities.

Thinking Neighbourhoods: Principles for Local Government

It is in the interests of all tiers of government to ‘think neighbourhoods’, to consider how they can use programmes, policy and other interventions to enable the development of community-led institutions.

Local government operates in challenging circumstances – budgets are tight, and the pressures on statutory services such as housing and health and social care continue to grow. Devolution and re-organisation add a layer of complexity and challenge to this in many places. A shared understanding exists among local authorities that to deliver the best outcomes for their residents, and in some cases keep their heads above water, a more strategic and focused approach is imperative. This means considering their role, what they can and can’t, should or should not do, carefully.

ICON’s initial report, [Think Neighbourhoods](#), has demonstrated that there are significant benefits for places and communities when interventions and resources are targeted at the hyper-local level with the objective of building local capacity, strengthening connections and social capital, supporting a richer base of people to engage with their local community. Local government has a role to play in enabling these benefits and stands to reap rewards itself, if done right.

At the local level, government has a role to play as an anchor institution in a much broader eco-system that enables communities to build organisational capacity and capability. In turn, local authorities stand to learn more about the places and people they serve, and benefit from the ability to more effectively target their service delivery.

There are three foundational ways that local government can operate more effectively at the neighbourhood level.

1. Convening – local government is a foundational anchor institution with significant power and capacity to bring together and mobilise other stakeholders around a problem.
2. Capacity building – creating the conditions for local places to thrive, by enabling their ability to operate and build capacity both within and outside of their organisation.
3. Coordination – altering ways of working within the organisation to prioritise relationship building at the hyper local level.

These are not isolated phases but should be carried out simultaneously, building on the assets and strengths of local areas.

Convening

Local authorities can operate as facilitators and enablers in the process of building social capital in neighbourhoods.

Local governments are anchor organisations that occupy a foundational role in their areas. One of the key ways that they can enable increased neighbourhood working and social capital is by bringing together other organisations and stakeholders and creating the conditions for the creation of social infrastructure through cross sector partnerships.

Through the relationships it holds formally and informally with businesses, voluntary sector organisations and residents themselves, local government has significant convening power. In practice, convening can look like a number of things, from freeing up and providing the physical space for groups and communities to come together, to using the mechanisms it has at its disposal, such as Town Centre meetings, borough or ward partnerships and others, to connect and facilitate relationship building among stakeholders.

In our conversations with local government, we heard that in some places a lack of activity at the local level is not always the problem. Local organisations offering similar or even identical provision, (such as a youth club) sometimes even on the same day, ultimately negatively impact their collective potential to do more and reach more local people. The local authority should support as a convener, drawing these organisations together around their shared goals and maximizing their capacity. Understanding the social infrastructure that exists within their areas, and being able to mobilise and bring people together is a fundamental role that local government can and should play in this agenda.

ICON's research, *Pride in Parades*, has shown that although some neighbourhoods have a rich tapestry of local assets from formal social infrastructure (e.g. community centres) to informal social infrastructure such as playgroups, gyms and cafes. Unfortunately, many disadvantaged areas have significantly fewer of these institutions than richer areas. Effective convening requires mapping and understanding the community-led institutions and groups within an area.

Maintaining and strengthening the relationships that exist at a local level will be increasingly important in the context of devolution – at a time where the stability of local government itself may temporarily waver because of changes to devolved structures, it is imperative that these changes do not damage local social infrastructure. During that period and going forward, local government should be seeking to operate as a local steward and thus create the enabling conditions for social infrastructure at the hyper local level.

Capacity Building

The long-term goal of any local authority involvement in delivering or supporting interventions at the neighbourhood level should be the creation of self-sustaining community infrastructure and increased social capital. As our research demonstrates, this is fundamental to thriving places and better outcomes for people. However, we know that for many places around the country, particularly disadvantaged neighbourhoods, there is a perceived lack of capacity to take on and deliver this work. The enabling conditions, such as a thriving VCS sector, spaces readily available for people to meet and organise, local businesses that invest in their area and effective community leaders, are not a given in many of these places.

As such, significant capacity building is required in communities themselves and within local government to enable the development of thriving local places. Local government should focus on creating the conditions for communities and residents to take control and do things for themselves, on their own terms. This can be providing training and support on governance, financial management and bid writing. It can be providing financial resources and seed investment into community-led institutions. It can be working in collaboration with local communities to pitch for investment in local infrastructure. There are significant opportunities to collaborate with foundations and philanthropists to support this work as well as finding ways to use programmes, such as *Pride in Place*, to invest in community-led institutions.

Crucially, people cannot and will not participate effectively at the local level if their basic needs are not met. Local government should not consider this type of work in isolation and instead must understand the relationship between building social capital and improving outcomes, and statutory service provision. Creating the conditions for people to effectively participate in activity in their communities that will enrich their lives and build social cohesion involves ensuring that the services within their control are delivered effectively and strategically at the hyper local level. Neighbourhood policing and health services form part of this picture and demonstrate the direction of travel from central government.

In practice, there are a range of different ways which could manifest. For example, co-locating services within neighbourhoods to enable a more place-based approach to service delivery, as happened in Wigan as part of their 2020 Deal. Other local authorities have adopted this approach, including Islington Council, where there are now 'Access Islington Hubs' in each of their 3 localities – one front door in each area that offers support across a range of services, either directly from the council or signposted to other organisations.

Co-location is a key enabler of a more relational model of working, where officers and VCS organisations delivering services are empowered, through the structure of delivery, to build relationships with residents and one another in a smaller geography.

Coordination

Local authorities can organise themselves internally to enable them to better understand and utilise their communities on a hyper local level, to deliver services and better meet their objectives.

Understanding the needs of communities on a hyper local level can be beneficial to local authorities at a time of significant financial and political pressure. Understanding a place through the lens of neighbourhoods can also provide local government with an opportunity to work with and for communities to solve problems that occur at that hyper local level. As such, meeting the broader, pressing objectives does not necessarily have to be at odds with a shift to hyper local working. Instead, it can be enabled by it.

In essence, this means local government 'turning towards' neighbourhoods, and encouraging other critical institutions to do so, in terms of the way that they think and operate. Examples of local governments that have successfully shifted their way of working all point to culture change as being central to that success – while it may seem intangible, it is an essential component of change. In practice, it means prioritising differently, identifying the ways that the organisation can work differently and enabling officers to do so.

There are several ways to do this in the context of neighbourhood working, including analysing and sharing data held at the local level across departments, enabling better join up between services who work with residents on that level – ultimately, understanding the problems they are seeking to solve through a different lens and creating the conditions for the organisation to respond differently, in partnership with communities and VCS organisations.

We heard anecdotally from local authorities where this had taken place. For example, a council had objectives to improve health and wellbeing of their residents, and for people to be making more use of green spaces to lead active lifestyles. This objective was agreed at a senior level but buried deep in internal council reports. On the ground, an officer who had spent time in some of their most deprived areas knew that no one was using the green spaces because they were not fit for purpose. They needed small changes, like new benches, litter picks and some encouragement through conversations and better coordination with the VCS, to enable people to use them.

In this example, coordination internally and externally facilitated some simple, low cost solutions. This enabled the community in those areas to make better use of the green spaces, not only meeting the broader council health and wellbeing objectives, but facilitating more social cohesion through the conversations people have when they spend time in shared spaces – parents waiting for their children on the playground, for example.

This demonstrates that culture change does not have to look like councils committing significant additional resources or funding to a problem, doing drastic restructures or developing new strategies. It can simply be creating the conditions for teams to talk to each other about a shared problem that they want to solve differently, by operating through a hyper local lens.

Case Studies: Neighbourhood Working in Practice

Stoke-on-Trent City Council

'Strengthening Communities' programme is a new model of place-based community engagement in Stoke. First, they used data and evidence to identify priority areas in need of support to build community infrastructure and **capacity**. Then, officers have taken a strength-based approach to relationship building on the hyper-local level. This model places the local authority in the role of the **connector**, by creating the conditions at the hyper-local level for people to engage in activities and conversations about what matters to them.

The rationale behind this approach is that city-wide, the council already has a good understanding of where the most acute challenges are and what it needs to prioritise. They wanted to firstly build an additional layer of insight onto this from communities themselves in those priority areas, that could then enable them to address some of these challenges in partnership with those people.

By creating the foundations for people to get involved, and learning more about the places, officers have begun to do this – identifying gaps and overlaps in provision. In some areas, there is existing provision that was disconnected from one another – for example multiple youth clubs were operating on the same day. By connecting these organisations with one another, the council were able to facilitate the expansion of this type of provision in the area when the clubs started operating on different days.

This approach demonstrates that there is a role for the local authority in a place, but that role doesn't necessarily need to be creating new initiatives or delivering everything themselves. Instead, developing a better understanding of communities and creating the space and capacity for them to deliver for themselves can be more effective.

Doncaster City Council

Thrive Programme and Team Doncaster bring together both internal ways of working and strategic partnerships to deliver community prevention at the hyper-local level. Building on historical working with communities and partners, the council developed and rolled out an internal philosophy of approach for integrated neighbourhood working.

This approach is based around embedding core principles of relational over transactional working, whole-system, asset based and putting residents at the heart of what they do, with **coordination** across services and partners. These organisational shifts function to connect corporate strategic ambitions to practical delivery and how people operate in their day to day. In practice, this is driven through some core ways of working: leadership and coordination and a delivery model of 5 localities which are the core delivery footprints and 6 hyper-local areas where intensive efforts are focused.

A key benefit of this approach is the way it enables the council and its strategic partners to operate with stability in the context of place-based policy initiatives – when new funding pots or programmes are announced or awarded, Doncaster is able to respond with agility and adapt these new initiatives to an existing and established approach and set of priorities. This shifts the city into a proactive and preventative space, **builds capacity locally** and enables the council to operate in an often challenging funding environment that has historically encouraged reactivity and short-termism.

Hounslow Borough Council

Hounslow Borough Council has developed a borough-wide Community Development Approach that blends place-based engagement with 'asset-based community development'. This model embeds council officers directly within communities, where they build relationships, foster trust, and support residents to identify and act on their own priorities.

These officers act not as service deliverers, but as enablers and connectors—facilitating collaboration between residents, community groups, and council services. The analogy they use is 'building roads and bridges' between communities. By consistently showing up without a fixed agenda, they help build social capital: the trust, networks, and shared understanding that make communities more capable, resilient, and connected.

This approach has led to communities working with the Council to deliver local forums, forming new partnerships to draw in external investment into high areas of deprivation, and unlocking the sharing of non-Council resources through relationship-building, **building capacity** within communities themselves. It also enhances the council's ability to conduct consultation and engagement—because when trust is already established, engagement is more inclusive, less transactional, and more meaningful. In other words, those roads and bridges make consultation, engagement and partnership working a lot more effective.

Crucially, Hounslow's model positions the council not as an external authority, but as a participant in the community that can support through **convening and connecting**. Officers are part of the local fabric, and the council's role is reframed as a facilitator of civic life—helping to manufacture capacity where needed, and amplify it where it already exists.

This way of working enables the council to make better decisions, respond more effectively to local challenges, and support communities to lead change on their own terms.

Practical examples of effective neighbourhood level approaches for local government

Principle	Intervention (what)	Delivery (how)
Capacity Building	Enabling community groups to access funding or assets	Providing organisations with support to write applications or apply for community asset transfers and other community rights.
Capacity Building	Mapping and identifying where social infrastructure exists in a local area and where gaps are to better join up organisations.	Using council and publicly-led data and relationships to map social infrastructure at a hyper local level.
Capacity Building	Improving physical infrastructure in communities to remove barriers to use and participation.	Making small changes/ improvements to neighbourhoods e.g. painting buildings or cleaning up local parks.
Convening	Partnership working with community-led institutions	Developing strategic and place based partnerships with VCS organisations, community groups or other actors – informally or through agreements such as Local Covenant Partnerships.
Convening	Providing physical spaces for communities to gather and build capacity	Removing or reducing costs for communities to use council-owned facilities in their area to develop community infrastructure, run activities or deliver services.
Convening	Hosting other organisations or meetings between them to facilitate partnership.	Offering council-owned spaces or supporting with hosting meetings between VCS organisations and residents to facilitate more joined-up working.

Principle	Intervention (what)	Delivery (how)
Coordination	Measuring Social Capital	Developing mechanisms to measure social capital and social infrastructure. Factoring this into performance indicators and prioritising alongside traditional metrics as part of decision making and resource allocation.
Coordination	Sharing data between teams and departments	Review data-sharing across directorates and teams that relates to a neighbourhood, improving data sharing where possible to enable a more holistic understanding of challenges and opportunities at the hyper local level.
Coordination	Co-location of services in priority areas	Co-locating multiple priority council services within a neighbourhood to improve access and uptake, as well as providing opportunities for relationship building with and within the community and partnerships with VCS organisations.
Coordination	Prioritising preventative services in high priority or mission critical neighbourhoods	Preventative services (e.g. gyms or physical activities) as well as responsive ones (e.g. GP surgery) should be prioritised in mission critical areas, to enable a shift from reactive to preventative service delivery in those places.

National and local government partnership

This playbook has set out the role for local government in the emerging neighbourhoods policy landscape, including principles that could enable more effective working in this space, as well as some examples of best practice.

More effective working between national and local government is imperative to the success of this approach, and the outcomes it seeks to achieve for communities around the country. In any attempt to 'think neighbourhoods', national government and its departments must factor local government into planning and decision making more often, and earlier. There are some ways in which this can happen:

Better data sharing between national and local government. At present, government departments and local authorities are not singing from the same hymn sheet when it comes to data and evidence. Often, decisions are made at the national level on the basis of a data-set that is significantly different to those being used at a local level. Moving towards greater data sharing and consensus around what metrics and outcomes are being used and measured will enable far greater cohesion.

Involve local government in decision making about their areas. Local authorities have insight and an understanding of the places they operate in that goes beyond data held at the national level. Greater consultation when decisions are being made about those places, particularly in relation to funding allocation, is important to enable greater transparency and will mean that national and local government are more closely aligned in the delivery of their objectives.

Governance structures that give local government a seat at the table and prioritise communities. In delivering Pride in Place and other hyper-local interventions and programmes, central government should ensure that any governance structures involve, but are not limited to, local government. This should reflect and seek to maximise the convening and coordinating role that local authorities can play in their areas, whilst recognising that in many places, capacity building within local government is needed as much as in communities themselves. In our community governance paper, we set out a proposed governance structure for this agenda that prioritises giving autonomy and capacity to locally trusted organisations to deliver interventions and build capacity, with local government recognised as a key anchor institution that can steer this process, without being the primary vehicle for delivery.

Conclusion

Neighbourhood working is a strategic policy lever for local government to drive place-based transformation. By adopting the roles of convenor, coordinator, and capacity builder, councils can embed relational infrastructure and foster collaborative governance at the hyper-local level.

ICON's research provides a robust framework for this approach that national government is beginning to embrace, including the importance of local authorities having a significant role to play in the delivery of this growing agenda – many are already acting as place makers in their areas, enabling the development of social infrastructure and improved outcomes for residents.

Local government must align neighbourhood working with broader policy agendas—such as health equity, economic inclusion, and the importance of shared purpose, long-term commitment, and systems change. The principles and examples in this playbook offer a roadmap for councils to operationalise neighbourhood working as a core component of public service reform and community empowerment that can support them to meet the growing financial and political challenges they face.

