ICON Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods

One Problem, Many Goals: The first year of Pride in Place

An essay for the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods

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The Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods

The Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (ICON) was launched 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.

About this essay

ICON asked Phil Tinline to write a paper examining what policy lessons can be learned from the first year of Pride in Place. On that basis, the ideas set out here are the author's, and so should not be ascribed to the Commission as a whole, or to any individual Commissioners or their associated organisations.

About the author

Phil Tinline is a writer and journalist. He has produced reports for IPPR, Demos and the Future Governance Forum, where he is a Policy Associate. His work has appeared in the *New Statesman*, *Prospect*, the *Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Observer*, *Engelsberg Ideas* and the *New World*, and on BBC Radio 4. He is the author of *The Death of Consensus* and *Ghosts of Iron Mountain*.

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This paper is based on around twenty interviews, conducted in summer 2026, with some of those involved, primarily with people in and around central government, and some of those with a track record of work in this field on the ground. In most cases, these interviews were conducted off the record in the interests of candour. This means that the few points where I refer to or quote a specific person are only a small fraction of the contribution these conversations made to my overall work. I would very much like to thank everyone I spoke to for being so generous with their time, insights and experiences, from which I learned a great deal, and which I hope are fairly reflected in the end result. Needless to say, any errors are mine alone.

Introduction

Keir Starmer's government launched the Pride in Place programme towards the end of 2025. This report sets out to explore how it has taken shape so far, and how it could develop from now on, as it enters its second year under a new government. It is not intended to be an exhaustive 360-degree assessment, but rather a swift interim snapshot, to contribute to the honing of the programme from here on.

Its overall argument is that the programme has rightly focused on a crucial problem: the need to work with people and neighbourhoods that have been neglected and disempowered for far too long, to find ways to revive their fortunes. The Starmer government identified the areas concerned and the causes driving their difficulties, and found resources to help them. It took seriously the need to do so collaboratively.

However, it did not think through precisely what it was trying to achieve, or the structural and ideological barriers to doing so. The challenge for the Burnham government, therefore, is to learn from what has happened thus far and to surmount those barriers.

Pride in Place is still at an early stage; it is notable that its predecessor, the now well-regarded New Deal for Communities programme established by New Labour, was initially considered by some to be a failure. Even with that in mind, Pride in Place is a valuable project that is making progress. This paper examines how clear its aims have been, how effectively government has pursued them, how the answers to those two questions are related, and what can be learned from all this as the laudable and necessary drive to revive struggling neighbourhoods continues under the new government.

Summary

Part 1 of this report explores how three sets of power relations have shaped the programme to date:

In Section 1, we explore the clarity or otherwise of the programme's overall goal, and the power relations inside Whitehall which have shaped it. The focus here is on the role of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), and its relations with the centre of government: 10 Downing Street and the Treasury.

Section 2 focuses on power relations between MHCLG and local authorities, in particular the processes established by the department to steer local government's role.

In Section 3, we examine the power relations between residents of the neighbourhoods concerned with central and local government, focusing on the role of distrust in both forms of power.

Part 2 explores what all this suggests about the programme's future:

In Section 1, we focus on the role of central government in the light of the new government's priorities, and the paradox that devolving power successfully may also involve strengthening Whitehall's role.

Section 2 asks whether, at a local level, existing institutions and structures should be more central to the programme.

Finally, in Section 3, we suggest some ways to address the public distrust identified in Part 1.

Part 1 | Section 1

Power relations inside Whitehall

The goal

The Starmer government made some strikingly grand claims for what Pride in Place would achieve. When it was announced on 24 September 2025, a press release from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government – the department charged with overseeing the programme – proclaimed that 'The measures form the largest transfer of power from Whitehall to communities in history'.[1]

In March 2026, the government expanded the programme from 244 to 284 areas, with an eye on the looming May local elections, when Labour was correctly expected to haemorrhage vast numbers of council seats. To accompany the expansion, MHCLG issued guidance which declared that 'this programme represents a long-term strategy to fix the foundations in hundreds of communities across the country'. It wanted the Neighbourhood Boards that would lead the programme 'to tackle the root causes' of social division 'by rebuilding relationships, restoring a collective sense of belonging to the community, and bringing people together so they can feel proud of their area and safe in their neighbourhood.'[2]

All this might give the reader the impression that this programme was a core government priority. Reading through these documents, however, reveals a dissonance between the rhetoric they open with, and what follows: the two sections tell two different stories of power. The first is about 'the largest transfer of power from Whitehall to communities in history'. The other, however, suggests that the project is bound by so many constraints that 'foundations' may not in fact end up being fixed, nor 'root' causes tackled, and that the transfer of power concerned may not be quite so historic.

The problem starts with whether 'Whitehall' agrees with itself about what this programme is attempting to do, how high a priority that goal should be, and how much fiscal, procedural and cultural orthodoxy must therefore be overridden to achieve it.

There is evidence that the broad idea of Pride in Place is popular, and that it might prove effective in tackling public disaffection with politics. Alas, this promise appears to have licensed a lack of clarity about what precisely it was intended to achieve. The following overlapping goals are all either explicitly claimed for the programme, or implicit in the rhetoric surrounding it:

- to demonstrate that government cares about struggling neighbourhoods;
- to restore the physical infrastructure of struggling communities;
- to restore the social fabric of struggling communities;
- to re-empower the citizens of struggling communities;
- to kill off support for Reform UK and other hard-right populists;
- to reimagine the relationship between citizen and state;
- to achieve a fundamental restructuring of how power functions in Britain;

1 'Communities to seize control over high streets and restore pride', MHCLG and Steve Reed, 24 September 2025
2 Guidance: Pride in Place Programme: prospectus, MHCLG, updated 20 March 2026.

- to drive the design of more locally-responsive public services.[3]

This ambiguity of aim was worsened by the absence of decisive leadership. The programme has not to date acquired a political champion equipped with both the organisational power base and the political skill to drive it forwards, despite proposals in this vein at the centre of government. There was no adequate mechanism in Keir Starmer's 10 Downing Street to oversee the programme, despite attempts to replicate the core team that successfully led on the SEND reforms.

The Place Unit

Unlike New Labour's New Deal for Communities and the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, Pride in Place has not been entrenched as a whole-of-government initiative, with all the necessary forces aligned to the programme's goal. Instead it was delegated to MHCLG – a department which can exercise at best middling power in Whitehall, with limited ability to command the co-operation of other departments that are pursuing their own goals. Some of those goals pull attention away from the Pride in Place areas; some try to tackle similar problems from different angles, such as community healthcare and family hubs. Some criticise MHCLG for a lack of political leadership and for defaulting to process-ology. Others argue that while officials have worked hard to deliver the programme, and achieved much along the way, the constraints were such that it has effectively been asked to deliver the impossible.

In late spring 2026, there was an attempt to impose a more cross-cutting approach, bringing together secretaries of state and other ministers in 10 Downing Street to try to galvanise a politics of place across government, and to press home why this mattered for political and democratic renewal. A small 'Place Unit' was established to lead this. As the then Housing Secretary put it on 14 July 2026, the new unit was 'intended to work with other Government Departments to ensure that they are also participating in place-based integration'.[4]

The Place Unit was not located in the Cabinet Office, given its reputation within and beyond Whitehall for being bloated and ineffective. Instead, it was based in MHCLG and backed by Number 10. Its goal was to 'act as a convenor across departments, local stakeholders and community and place experts'; the then Housing Secretary Steve Reed explained that it would ensure 'that place and community are considered in policy development' and help 'bring local voices into central government decision making'.[5]

A senior figure in Starmer's Number 10 freely admits that basing the new unit in MHCLG may have been a mistake, given the difficulty of overcoming Whitehall's institutional architecture. Despite strong leadership, the Place Unit 'struggled to get off the ground' before the Starmer government fell. Further, in the absence of a clear, consistently-articulated, compelling, single-sentence definition for the programme, and of structurally effective political leadership, the centre of government did too little to think through policy in detail. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the orthodox thinking and process which would always by default have constrained the achievement of the programme's promises has thus far prevailed.

The capital-revenue ratio

Delivering the promised transformations of the Pride in Place areas is a forbidding challenge, which would likely require a radical, cross-government integration of training, employment, skills, the benefits system and the transport system. Similarly, spending £2 million annually in

3 See MHCLG 20 March 2026: 'Places should be able to design public services that are accessible, responsive, and tailored to local need.'

4 Oral evidence: The Work of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, HC 46, Tuesday 14 July 2026.

5 T. Markson, 'New "test, learn and grow" fund announced', *Civil Service World*, 18 June 2026.

each area over a decade may simply be far too little to accomplish lasting change in places faced with multiple, deeply-entrenched difficulties.

In terms of spending allocation, 37 percent of the Pride in Place spending for each area is from the government's revenue budget; 63 percent is capital. The latter was easier to secure, given that it is one-off expenditure which is of less concern to the Treasury than potentially open-ended revenue spending. This was especially so in the light of the changes to the fiscal rules in the October 2024 budget, which allowed for greater capital investment, while revenue spending remained tightly constrained. This settlement therefore appeared to mark the limit of the spending increase that the Treasury was prepared to countenance for the new programme under the fiscal rules, given the UK state's high levels of borrowing.

The overall settlement was widely regarded as a win for the new programme, and there is certainly a case for prioritising capital spending to create visible improvements to neighbourhoods' infrastructure. Whatever the merits of this argument, however, it was at odds with the transfer of power promised. In February 2026, MHCLG heralded its latest announcement of Pride in Place neighbourhoods by vowing that residents 'will be able to decide where up to £20 million is invested in their neighbourhood'.[6] The capital-revenue ratio, however, means that local people's actual ability to do so is sharply constrained. Regardless of local preference, it pulls spending decisions towards commissioning new buildings rather than fostering existing organisations or creating new ones. This bias is reflected in the examples given in the relevant press release, setting out what local people might decide to do with the money.

Spending capital funding is also more cumbersome than revenue expenditure, as it involves larger, one-off sums and often more complex procurement procedures. It carries the risk, if the project thus funded isn't maintained through ongoing revenue funding over a longer period, of becoming a white elephant – a fate that befell some of the capital projects funded under the New Deal for Communities.

One of the besetting sins of the Starmer government was its unwillingness to follow its own rhetoric through to the logical consequences, and then to act accordingly. The ease with which promises of empowerment can be made must not be allowed to obscure the realities of the challenges facing these communities, their profound divergence from the worldviews common in Whitehall, or the difficulty of overcoming either of these issues.

If Pride in Place is truly to be the biggest ever shift in power to local communities, that necessarily involves interrogating the constraints put on it by the governing orthodoxy. Centralisation of power in Whitehall has continued regardless of contrary rhetoric, because it is held in place by cumulatively onerous layers of rules, which are in turn underpinned by deeply-rooted fears. Achieving a genuine transformation in who holds power would mean addressing and overcoming this.

6 'Pride in Place: 40 neighbourhoods join transformational programme', MHCLG, Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, Steve Reed, Keir Starmer, 4 February 2026.

Power relations between Whitehall and local authorities

MHCLG's public statements on Pride in Place are at times highly critical of the excessive concentration of power in Whitehall. Its prospectus on the initial phase, at that time titled the Plan for Neighbourhoods, criticises previous government-led attempts to 'tackle community tensions and inequalities and improve outcomes in areas facing the biggest challenges' on the grounds that they were often 'overly centralised'. This failed to recognise 'the unique approach needed by each place', provoking 'growing discontent with top-down decision-making that is out of touch with local priorities.'[7] When Pride in Place was launched that November, the department promised that, this time, while the scheme would be 'backed by the UK government', it would be 'led by local people', who would be handed powers to 'transform their communities'.[8]

Once again, however, the strictures that constrain the programme implicitly tell a different story about power. The March 2025 Guidance emphasises that local authorities will be accountable for ensuring that the public funds passed to communities under the programme are 'distributed fairly and effectively', and that they are managed in line with the seven Nolan Principles of Public Life (selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, leadership), and the Treasury's 298-page guide to Managing Public Money, plus accompanying documents. Local authorities, the Guidance underlines, are also 'responsible for compliance with legal responsibilities in relation to subsidy control, state aid and procurement'.[9]

There is, however, no explicit attempt to address the question of how far these restrictions risk thwarting the government's stated aims, or why, in the case of this specific programme, that might be justified.

Some critics of Pride in Place contend that it has no theory of change, but this seems unfair. It does have such a theory: that by moving power to people in their neighbourhoods, they will be able to develop a sense of agency, and drive the local change they want to see. The problem is more that existing practices have not been adapted to match that theory. This would demand significant cultural adjustment and legal reform, and there is little sense that the theory of change takes this into account.

The tendency appears rather to regard rhetoric and fine print as different tasks for different people, with no one taking responsibility to ensure that the two cohere, by deciding which must take priority on a given point, and why. It is not consistent to write about 'the unique approach needed by each place', then impose hundreds of pages of one-size-fits-all rules on all of them. One minister suggests that senior civil servants who have never worked in a local authority are simply unaware of the breadth and depth of difference between struggling areas, even within a single region. To deliver true decentralisation of power, MHCLG would also need to adopt a strategic leadership approach, rather than defaulting to

7 'Plan for Neighbourhoods: prospectus', MHCLG, updated 16 June 2025
8 'What is Pride in Place?', MHCLG, 10 November 2025.
9 'Plan for Neighbourhoods: governance and boundary guidance', MHCLG, 12 March 2025.

micro-management through data collection on 'key performance indicators' and other would-be objective measurements.

The process of appointing Neighbourhood Boards

A primary focus of the relationship between MHCLG and local authorities is the process, designed by the department, for the creation of Neighbourhood Boards. Giving evidence to a select committee towards the end of his tenure, the then Housing Secretary Steve Reed argued that given both the 'huge breakdown in trust in politics, partly because of the deep regional economic inequalities that we see' and the failure of austerity, Brexit and levelling up, 'another top-down imposed agenda was just not going to work'. The way to 'rebuild trust' was 'by showing that politicians trust people, but you have to not overly constrain them'. He accepted that 'you have to monitor what is taking place, and you need to demonstrate value for money in the way that the money is being used,' but warned that 'if you impose strictures right from the front, you are not giving power to those communities.'[10]

However, the cumulative effect of the many specifications risks imposing strictures more than giving away power. Across its various documents setting out how Pride in Place should work, MHCLG strives to strike a balance between handing over power and maintaining control, in two ways.

First, MHCLG has sought to ensure the empowerment of boards by asserting Whitehall authority over local government, including through the establishment of a Communities Delivery Unit, based in the department. This offers advice on choosing a Board chair, to be appointed by the local authority, 'following consultation with the local MP'. It underlines that 'councils should ensure that their Neighbourhood Board membership complies with their equality duties'. Once appointed, local authorities 'should work closely with their place's Neighbourhood Board to develop and embed appropriate processes and controls for funding'.[11]

And second, MHCLG also tries to ensure the empowerment of ordinary residents by asserting Whitehall authority over the Neighbourhood Boards. It sets out detailed expectations of what Boards will publish, and when.[12] In its March 2026 prospectus, it stipulates that Boards 'must submit evidence showing that they have delivered engagement' with residents and local groups in a manner which aligns with 'best practice principles' for community involvement.[13] These are:

- engage from the start;
- effective community organising;
- focus on those less likely to be heard;
- build on existing assets and connections in your community;
- involve people in decision-making, taking a participatory approach;
- make time for meaningful engagement;
- actively listen to the local community;
- invite challenge and scrutiny.

The department warns that 'we will only approve spending if community groups, local organisations and social clubs have been included in decisions on how the money should be spent.' It does, however, provide a list of 'indicative interventions'[14] that do not need

10 'Oral evidence: The Work of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government', HC 46, 14 July 2026.
11 'Plan for Neighbourhoods: governance and boundary guidance', MHCLG, 12 March 2025.
12 See 'Plan for Neighbourhoods: governance and boundary guidance', MHCLG, 12 March 2025.
13 'Pride in Place Programme: prospectus', MHCLG, updated 20 March 2026.
14 'Pride in Place Programme: list of indicative interventions', MHCLG, 20 March 2026

specific approval, so as 'to make sure Boards have maximum flexibility and are not required to regularly seek approval from central government'.[15]

One Labour MP reports that in their constituency, the experience of Pride in Place and the process of the Neighbourhood Board drawing up a plan, has been 'almost entirely positive' – a 'really good opportunity to connect with people with a sense of purpose'. Given their prior experience of working on regeneration and community development in disempowered areas, this MP was less concerned than some by the fractiousness of meetings with community groups, retailers, tenants, residents associations and so on, observing that it's good to give people a chance to vent their frustration.

Setting boundaries

One issue raised in many of the interviews for this paper is the question of how the borderlines of Pride in Place areas are decided, and how they clash with other boundaries. As one minister notes, at the policy design level, this involves a trade-off between making the area small enough 'to be meaningfully a neighbourhood', so that 'people recognise their membership of it', while being aware that the smaller it is, the more it risks triggering resentment from those who live just outside the line.

In order to fulfil existing public sector obligations to be fair, consistent and transparent, the default boundaries are based on Office for National Statistics definitions, with the restriction that there can only be one full area per parliamentary constituency. Neighbourhood Boards are allowed to appeal to MHCLG to alter their default boundary to remove anomalies, such as 'if a key asset sits just outside of an area's default boundary, or if residents feel that a key street has been excluded from the neighbourhood boundary'.[16]

Nonetheless, one consequence is that boundary lines do not necessarily chime with locals' sense of their place – an appeal to which is meant to be at the heart of the programme. This can create boundary effects such as one side of a road receiving money but not the other and, as one policy expert points out, 'you're then giving that problem to people locally to manage'.

A second consequence of this approach is that the Pride in Place boundaries often don't match other administrative borderlines. This is one instance of the problem identified by the councillor and local government policy specialist Jack Shaw as the 'Incoherent State': of multiple, mismatched public service boundaries – from NHS Integrated Care Boards to utilities regions via the police, and many more – which then don't align with governance boundaries.[17]

This issue may simply be unavoidable if the programme's approach has to be based on strictly-defined notions of place, but that does not detract from the fact that it makes trying to cajole different elements of the state to work together at local level more difficult.

Local government's capacity to deliver

This points to the fact that, like central government, local government is also enmeshed in rules that restrict its ability to effect the transformation Pride in Place promises. Each stage in the process requires sign-off by the local authority's cabinet. On top of the process of recruiting a board and fulfilling MHCLG paperwork requirements, this can render the process of releasing money painfully slow. This is in the context of the combination of hundreds of statutory responsibilities, by-laws and other policies, and responsibility silos, fostering what Shaw calls an 'environment of complexity' and a broader culture of risk aversion with many

15 Guidance: Pride in Place Programme: prospectus, MHCLG, updated 20 March 2026.
16 Guidance: Pride in Place Programme: prospectus, MHCLG, updated 20 March 2026.
17 J. Shaw, 'The Incoherent State is holding England back', *Arguably* (Substack), 7 August 2026.

'veto players' – a 'maze of rules' in which, as one MP puts it, 'everyone needs everyone's permission, so nothing happens'.

On top of this, local government spending power fell by 22.6 percent in real terms over the course of the 2010s; after a partial recovery, in 2025-26 it was still 8.2 percent lower than when the coalition government launched its austerity programme in 2010.[18] As Andy Burnham remarked shortly before becoming prime minister, 'While national government has got bigger, particularly since the pandemic, local government is threadbare and without the resources to fulfil even statutory responsibilities.'[19] Some authorities have been reduced to focusing on maintaining the provision of core services such as social care; others are borrowing to balance budgets or are at risk of bankruptcy.

In a bleak inversion of Stanley Baldwin's jibe at the popular press, local authorities are expected to exercise responsibility without power. As another MP observes, 'We've not yet worked out the moral injury done to frontline professionals by that experience [of austerity] – no one becomes a housing person to make people homeless'. It is also common to find members of senior local government leadership teams on temporary contracts. A finance director moving annually from authority to authority will naturally be more focused on their statutory duties and on the immediate stabilisation of the finances, rather than funding long-term transformation on struggling neighbourhoods. In this context, as Shaw observes, it is not surprising that some local authorities have not been well-placed to think creatively, and have reportedly seen Pride in Place less as a means to empower communities than to boost their emaciated resources.

Whitehall has a tendency to patronising scepticism about the capability of local government – notwithstanding the fact that the culture of risk aversion in the two spheres is similar, and that national governments have played a significant role in the withering of local government's capacity. Nonetheless, the view that 'the council is useless' is reportedly common with respect to Pride in Place, whatever the formal guidance says. Some in the centre of government report a tendency to give councillors a strikingly minimal role.

18 G. Atkins, 'Local government funding in England', Institute for Government, 22 January 2026.
19 A. Burnham, Speech at the People's History Museum, Manchester, 29 June 2026.

Power relations between residents and government

One consequence of the unfocused nature of Pride in Place's goal(s) has been a lack of clarity in the way it is communicated to the public. This appears to have been exacerbated by divisions in the centre of government between those directly involved in communications and those working on Pride in Place itself. As one put it, 'you can't ask the public for credit on something when it's not clear what credit it is you're looking for'. Even if its goal were crystal clear, however, the local and incremental improvements the programme is designed to deliver do not fit easily into the standard Whitehall media-handling template, based on high-visibility announcements with putative national impact.

In material published by MHCLG, there has been sustained effort to provide examples of the practical effects of this approach, citing case studies illustrating the positive outcomes delivered through funding community organisations.[20]

However, the underlying issue is whether the changes Pride in Place is able to effect are sufficient to persuade people that their neighbourhood is changing for the better.

Underestimation of public distrust

As we've seen, the guidance from MHCLG emphasises the importance of going beyond the '"usual" methods of engagement', in order to encourage the involvement of those who are 'less likely to be heard'. The examples given are 'people experiencing homelessness, without access to the internet, who do not speak English, or the elderly'.[21] To this list might usefully be added young people not in education, employment or training, and less immediately identifiable categories, such as 'stressed-out parents juggling underpaid work and childcare', and 'families living one step from financial calamity'.

However, beyond general remarks about distrust in politics, there is little sense in departmental statements of the depth of alienation in some of the neighbourhoods concerned. A senior figure in Starmer's Number 10 reports a surprisingly negative reaction to the programme from community leaders, based on a weariness of previous government promises of empowerment, which have been entangled in restrictions – a view they summarise as: 'this is just a government programme like all the others, with loads of rules and loads of red tape'.

The breakdown in trust prior to the programme appears to be much more severe in terms of ordinary residents, to the point that 'politics and community have come to be seen as opposites'.[22] On at least one troubled estate, the local project lead reportedly found that when anyone turns up with a perceived link to the council, some people's immediate concern is that the person has come to take their children away.

More broadly, people voice the suspicion that Pride in Place money will only benefit other people, or the 'usual suspects'. Underpinning some of this is a zero-sum interpretation of who benefits from public spending, which may be driven by long experience of

20 Guidance: Pride in Place Programme: prospectus, MHCLG, updated 20 March 2026.
21 'Pride in Place Programme: prospectus', MHCLG, updated 20 March 2026.
22 S. Hilhorst, *Places to Come Together: Rebuilding Local Solidarities Against the Far Right*, Institute for Public Policy Research, July 2025, 9.

austerity-driven scarcity. One Labour MP observes that a service retained by one part of the community is sometimes interpreted by another part of that community as something being taken from them. As they note, when Pride in Place policy was being developed, there was concern about how boroughs that didn't receive funding would feel. What was reportedly not anticipated was that resentment might actually be more intense within the area concerned.

Some of this suspicion is likely to be informed by ongoing public misperceptions. These include:

- a failure to distinguish between unfair treatment and the inevitable advantage that accrues to people with past experience of applying for funding;
- a limited understanding of what constitutes economic growth and the links between investment and later outcomes;
- wrongly crediting private companies for transport and accessibility improvements;[23]
- a lack of awareness that councils are being forced by budgetary constraints to cut funding for widely-enjoyed facilities and events, in order to maintain relatively invisible core services such as children's social care;
- the notion that local authorities are to blame for high street decline;[24]
- nostalgia for the largely defunct model of traditional high street of independent shops.[25]

Such perspectives and the preferences that follow from them risk obscuring viable routes to transformation: long-term transport infrastructure investment, for example, or the 'civic high street' model advocated by the community business 'think-do tank' Power to Change.[26]

However, suspicion also derives from real experience of the way the state – and the wider economy – interacts with local communities. The state often presents itself as a 'punitive force': the jobs centre sanctioning benefits, home visits from services for children excluded from school, the council itself levying fines, pressure from social landlords, and the sense in some communities that they are under-served and over-policed by law enforcement. MHCLG is surely correct to insist that Neighbourhood Boards work to seek out and listen properly to hard-to-reach voices, not least because they may reveal preferences that diverge from expectations. They may, for example, be much more interested in greater access to a low-cost supermarket than to having a new community centre.

The challenge is severe. Focus groups convened by Public First to test local responses to capital spending on regeneration in Blackpool, much of which came from the Levelling Up Fund, are indicative: 'Several people pointed to projects they felt had absorbed money without making much difference: the refurbished Houndshill shopping centre, partly empty office space, a tram extension few of them use.' However unfairly, many 'assumed that much of the money went on administration rather than reaching the town itself'.[27]

This is where the capital-revenue ratio imposed on Pride in Place funding by the strictures of the fiscal rules collides with public distrust. It means that, having been told they can choose

23 D. Chatterjee, *What became of the likely lads?: Looking back on a decade of regeneration funding since the Brexit referendum*, Public First, June 2026.

24 See for example polling by Dynata for and Persuasion UK in August 2025, which found that, among those sampled who rated their high street as 'quite bad' or 'very bad', 61% blamed decisions taken by local government, as against decisions taken by big business (25 percent) or national government (35 percent), or changing consumer desires (37 percent), Dynata for Future Governance Forum / Persuasion UK (n=3000, nationally representative sample, August 2025), in P. Tinline, *Power Failure: A New Theory of Power*, FGF, January 2026.

25 In at least one case a neighbourhood board chaired by a community organiser is reportedly opting to invest in what is likely to be a vain attempt to revive footfall through the local high street.

26 N. Plumb, L. Symington, 'Welcome to the Civic High Street Collective', Power to Change, 29 July 2026.

27 D. Chatterjee, *What became of the likely lads?: Looking back on a decade of regeneration funding since the Brexit referendum*, Public First, June 2026, 18-19.

how to spend the money, a neighbourhood that expresses a wish to invest in a youth programme, for example, may be told that, actually, they can't do that – but perhaps they would settle for a youth centre? Clare Wightman and Rosie Macleod of the long-standing Coventry community organisation Grapevine have warned that in the absence of clear priorities, pre-existing 'physical infrastructure needs' in deprived communities, along with 'pressure for urgent results', risk consuming all of Pride in Place's resources. 'The relational and capacity building aspects' of the programme, they write, 'though harder to see, are fundamental to its vision for renewal and community power.'[28]

The deep engagement encouraged in the MHCLG guidance takes time, as it acknowledges – but this risks coming into conflict with the political need to show tangible improvements as soon as possible, given that a government promising change took power over two years ago. This presents a difficult dilemma: invest time building trust relationships, and you risk achieving too little to convince those not directly involved that anything is changing for the better. Hurry to build, and you risk leaving a community struggling with the same mix of disempowerments, even as they walk past a once-new, government-funded building.

28 R. McLeod, C. Wightman, 'Fulfilling the promise of Pride in Place: how to create the infrastructure for community-led renewal', Future Governance Forum, 29 May 2026.

Part 2

The conclusion that arises from the reflections of interviewees aggregated in Part 1 is simple. Pride in Place is in need of a clear, overarching goal, which can be articulated in a single sentence, so that everyone understands what the government is trying to achieve.

The first word that requires clarification here – all the more so given its centrality to the rhetoric of the new Burnham government – is 'place'. To some this may mean a street, to others, a parliamentary constituency, a town, or a city.

There then needs to be clarity about the means of restoring 'pride'. Of the various possible angles on this – the restoration of community fabric, economic viability, and psychological well-being – one must emerge as the overarching goal, through which the others are to be achieved.

A clear, compelling, accepted definition is vital for three pragmatic political reasons:

- to meet the new government's insistence that all tiers of government work coherently together in the pursuit of common goals;
- to compel those forces in government which have effectively written off our dispossessed places to accept that the programme is a high priority, and should be aligned with other policy goals, such as reindustrialisation;
- to push back against the orthodox thinking that constrains the programme – with sufficient force to turn its claims of radicalism into reality.

This is doubly important given the new government's focus on devolving power.

The role of central government

Against Homer Simpson syndrome

On the face of it, a clear, universal definition might seem to pull against the principle of devolution. Paradoxically, however, devolution places new demands on Whitehall. It must not be allowed to retreat out of sight, like Homer Simpson sliding backwards into a hedge, muttering that the programme is now devolved. The point of devolution is to shift power to where it can most effectively be exercised, and there are certain tasks that Whitehall is best placed to deliver. Once it has devolved power, its goal should be to provide strategic direction and strong support. That might include:

- removing barriers and perverse incentives;
- ascertaining and addressing obstacles which confront councils and boards, including existing stresses on local authorities' operational staff;
- spreading learning and innovations;
- funding the development of innovative technology;
- reforming the law;
- using its power and expertise to help councils and boards be less risk-averse.

As Part 1 set out, while Pride in Place has lacked strategic direction, it has had no shortage of departmental management. By providing a clear, coherent overall goal for the programme, Whitehall might productively reverse this, absolving itself of the need to impose a large number of small demands. Coherence could come instead from each local authority and Neighbourhood Board pursuing the same goal, with maximum freedom to do so in creative ways that respond to their area's unique character and needs. As one policy expert puts it, 'this requires quite a different set of capabilities, a different style of leadership; it has deep implications for what government does day to day – getting out of direct delivery, and into enabling instead.'

Liberation from risk aversion

One obvious way in which central government could empower councils and Boards would be to loosen the rules entangling them. For example, MHCLG is establishing a Network for Neighbourhoods 'to share learning and best practice across the Neighbourhood Boards'.[29] A local government specialist consultant argues that Network for Neighbourhoods could be asked to identify and proselytise examples of initiatives that do not require a business case, to avoid them expending part of their funding – and time – commissioning consultants to write one. This could build on the list of 'indicative interventions' mentioned in Part 1.

More broadly, government should assess the proportionality of standard checks and balances, to test whether the costs in time, money and enthusiasm that they impose are justified. This might usefully be done by identifying the risks which the standard rules are attempting to forestall, and asking whether they objectively outweigh the counter-risks that follow from Pride in Place becoming so enmeshed in bureaucracy that it fails to keep its

29 Guidance: Pride in Place Programme: prospectus, MHCLG, updated 20 March 2026.

promises. One MP argues that there should be much clearer assessment of whether a given rule is truly necessary to prevent serious harm, which is relatively rarely the case – or whether it merely formalises an excessive distrust in local authority staff or board members, as is rather more common.

In the case of some authorities, this will also involve reassurance to counter a deeply-ingrained risk aversion that may well outlast any formal relaxation of rules. The same MP suggests that MHCLG could actively encourage boards to spend a given sum against a time limit, in return for working with them to compress and remove unnecessary process that turns out to block their path.

Reform the capital-revenue ratio

The programme could take a more transparent approach to explaining to communities the limits on what they can do with Pride in Place funding, by explaining the restrictions imposed by the capital-revenue ratio, and the reasons for that: primarily the UK's high debt levels. Instead of promising a free choice then presenting the constraints on it, it could build the limitations into the offer from the start, appealing to residents' own experience of restrictions on what they can do with their own money.

At the same time, given the relatively small sums involved and the potentially large gains in social and democratic stability, there is a case for challenging Treasury risk aversion, with the aim of negotiating an incremental move over the lifetime of the programme towards a greater proportion of revenue spending, ideally reaching a 1:1 ratio by the latter stages. This would help to ensure that new buildings constructed using funds from the capital budget can be staffed and maintained.

Devolve administration of Pride in Place to Combined Authorities

Several interviewees suggested that, where applicable, it would be more appropriate and effective for combined authorities, rather than a department in Whitehall, to oversee the programme, letting them deliver the overarching goal. Combined authorities have closer sight than Whitehall of the areas concerned and more ongoing relationships with interested parties, while wielding significantly more power than individual local authorities. They can bring all stakeholders concerned together in an ongoing network, even in a single room.

This tier of government offers another advantage too: its youth. The economist Dan Davies has observed that, over time, institutions accrue ever more fearful memories, which gradually renders them more risk averse. As Jack Shaw points out, combined authorities are new, and so relatively free of this. Moreover, this shift would be in line with recent transfers of power. These authorities are already responsible for health, wellbeing and public service reform – and indeed for the strategic and economic development of their regions. For many critics, the latter is the crucial element that has been missing from Pride in Place, if it is truly to be transformational.

Not all Pride in Place neighbourhoods are currently within the ambit of a combined authority, but the Burnham government has declared its ambition to establish strategic authorities across the country by the end of 2028.[30] If and when this happens, it would facilitate a wholesale devolution of power over the programme from Whitehall. With regard to the related problem of the 'Incoherent State', the new government has also undertaken to 'align key public service boundaries' with 'the boundaries of strategic authorities by the end of the Parliament'.[31]

30 'Rewiring the State', Cabinet Office, 31 July 2026, 5.
31 'Rewiring the State', Cabinet Office, 31 July 2026, 4.

Devolve people from Whitehall to local government

In his speech at Manchester's People's History Museum on 29 June 2026, Andy Burnham lamented the fact that 'While national government has got bigger, particularly since the pandemic, local government is threadbare and without the resources to fulfil even statutory responsibilities.' Whitehall is overstaffed; local authorities lack capacity. Mathematically, the conclusion is obvious.

As two high-ranking figures in the Starmer government put it, it should be impossible to become a senior civil servant without any experience of local government or running a frontline service. This principle would doubtless meet resistance, but the Cabinet Office has discretion to determine the basis on which recruitment and promotion decisions are made. With political will, therefore, it should be possible to incentivise gaining experience in local government. One way of testing this might be whether a senior official could live in Manchester for the whole of a successful, long-term career, as is routine in London.

Change on these lines would build on precedents that followed a similar logic:

- In the 2000s and 2010s, local authority chief executives were recruited to very senior roles in Whitehall: in 2009, for example, Carolyn Downs of Shropshire County Council became Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Justice; having previously run Sheffield City Council, Sir Bob Kerslake went on in 2012 to be the Head of the Home Civil Service. This approach has been reprised with the appointment of Tom Riordan, formerly Chief Executive of Leeds City Council, as Permanent Secretary of MHCLG in September 2026.[32]
- Significant aspects of Whitehall's work have been relocated beyond London, as with the Darlington Economic Campus, which delivers functions for several departments, up to and including the Treasury.[33]
- The establishment in 2025 of a new Government Digital Service unit, GDS Local, 'set up to strengthen collaboration, share learning and innovation between central and local government'.[34]
- The creation of Number 10 North has perhaps begun to change the answer to that question about whether a senior civil servant could spend their entire career in Manchester.

There are specific potential benefits of having significant numbers of Whitehall officials go and work in local authorities:

- each would gain greater understanding of the other's strengths, weaknesses, anxieties, taboos and constraints;
- working with Whitehall veterans would help tackle local officials' risk aversion by unpacking complicated legislation, and providing licence to interpret rules less strictly, through reassurance that going beyond apparent parameters would raise no objections in London;[35]
- conversely, the civil servants concerned would be able to develop a better sense of the sort of obstacles encountered by those charged with making legislation actually work, which might lead to more robust and effective policy design when they return to their previous roles;

32 'Tom Riordan Appointed as New Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government', Cabinet Office and MHCLG, 8 September 2026.

33 'Darlington Economic Campus', HM Treasury, updated 29 January 2024.

34 'Guidance: GDS Local', Department of Science, Innovation and Technology, Government Digital Service, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 22 November 2025.

35 See K. McKenzie, S. Warren, S. Watson, J. Craig, *The new high street playbook: Community-led innovation in action*, Power to Change, May 2026, 44.

- as Jessica Craig of Power to Change notes, this could create a positive feedback loop, continually strengthening both aspects of government.

This could be done in various ways, including formal secondment. A recent Power to Change report, *The new high street playbook: Community-led innovation in action*, recommends the creation of 'innovation teams' that would 'draw on expertise from central government (including MHCLG and Treasury)' as well as other stakeholders, designed to 'enable local authorities to put their existing high street powers into practice.'[36] In its statement 'Rewiring the State' on 31 July 2026, the newly-appointed Cabinet announced plans to work with local authorities 'on a strategy to develop their capacity and capability, including through transferring resource from central government where functions will now sit at the regional or local level'. It proposes that the civil service will become 'smaller and more strategic', giving it an opportunity 'to adapt and learn through greater interchange with regional and local government' while becoming 'more porous and working together to deliver better outcomes for the citizens we serve.' This will involve the active building of 'new career paths between central government and the wider public sector.'[37]

In August, the prime minister announced that 'high-performing civil servants will be sent to work in mayoral offices in England', initially under a pilot scheme with up to ten officials moving to work with each mayoral authority for six to nine months.[38]

Emergency powers

Labour MPs also suggest central government could usefully grant additional powers to local authorities to deal with issues such as street drinking and deserted, decaying or dubious high street shops. This, they argue, would then allow Pride in Place funding to be deployed swiftly and visibly, unimpeded by excessive bureaucratic process. Patrick Hurley, MP for Southport, suggests that, given the necessary powers to tackle street drinking, local authorities could work with their city region, MPs' office and charities to set up a dedicated unit. This would allow a shopkeeper to report that someone was dossing down in their doorway, for example, such that the unit would take the person concerned to a supportive setting such as a wet clinic, and start to deal with the issues driving their behaviour.

To tackle decaying, empty properties, Hurley suggests giving councils powers to write to the owner at the property itself, giving six weeks' notice that, unless they improve the condition of the property, the council will use Pride in Place funding to undertake it itself – replacing broken windows, cleaning gutters, and so on. Another MP suggests an approach to problematic shops 'akin to on-the-spot ASBO powers'. Currently, Hurley notes, local authorities have to issue notices and allow long periods for a response, and conduct investigations, before they can take action. Given appropriate powers, the local authority could instead use Pride in Place money to hire staff to issue on-the-spot closure orders, which the MP suggests would be highly popular. The prime minister has now announced plans to empower councils 'to reject new betting shops and adult gaming centres, while vape shops will be subject to planning permission'.[39]

Rental auctions

Alongside Pride in Place, under the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023, where a high street property 'has been unoccupied continuously for 12 months, or for at least 366 days (non-continuously) within a 24-month period', and where 'occupation of the premises for a

36 McKenzie, Warren, Watson, Craig, *The new high street playbook*, 44.
37 'Rewiring the State: Cabinet Statement', Cabinet Office, 31 July 2026
38 K. Whannel, 'Burnham to send high-performing civil servants to mayoral offices', BBC News, 21 August 2026.
39 A. Adu, A. Topping, 'Burnham to give councils more powers to block vape and betting shops', *Guardian*, 10 August 2026.

suitable high-street use would be beneficial', local authorities have the power to auction off the lease. They can also grant 'local businesses and community groups the "right to rent" empty commercial lots at market prices'.[40]

However, thus far this 'power' has reportedly been little used. This points to the practical limits of theoretical powers, and what is required to put them into action. It offers a useful example of several of the themes of this section:

- how moves by government to empower local authorities require strong governmental action to be effective;
- the utility of deploying civil servants to local authorities;
- the importance of a single agreed political goal, not least as a basis on which to challenge orthodoxy.

In its statement 'Rewiring the State' issued on 31 July 2026, the cabinet argued that the success of its devolution plans 'will rest on local institutions having the firepower and backing to use their powers effectively'. The rental auction reform offers a good test case. There are several steps central government could take to realise the potential power of this reform:

1. Ownership transparency

The first barrier to local authorities initiating a rental auction process is ascertaining the ownership of the property in question. As one researcher puts it, 'MPs and councils don't know who owns their high streets' – a problem highlighted during the pandemic. The government has made the Land Registry publicly accessible, but obtaining ownership information remains a haphazard and onerous process. This could be solved by legislating to require the ultimate beneficial owner of all properties to declare themselves as such, with proper contact details, by a reasonable deadline.

There would need to be provision to ensure compliance with data protection law, such as by stipulating, where necessary, that the declaration of ownership be made in confidence to the Land Registry, and to a designated officer of the local authority in question. This process would need to be designed to ensure it allowed for no obfuscation, along the lines of the creation of shell companies to obscure ultimate beneficial ownership in the Register of Overseas Interests. It would be worth bringing a team of lawyers together to act as a red team to identify potential loopholes in the draft legislation.

Should no one make such a declaration with respect to a given property, this reform would empower the council to initiate a rental auction process. This may raise concerns about the rights of property owners. If so, this would usefully reveal an example of how orthodoxy presents an underlying barrier to delivering the power to improve a local area. MHCLG is reportedly very wary of doing anything that might appear to interfere with property rights, but this arguably risks undermining the principle of rental auctions.

This sticking-point suggests that MHCLG may need to interrogate its institutional fear. It might usefully weigh this against criticism that property ownership is a right that carries responsibilities, and that by being unwilling to assert this, it empowers property owners who shirk their responsibilities, at an unacceptable cost to society. Likewise, it is currently the case that if a property owner allows a building to fall into such disrepair that the council has to issue a compulsory purchase order, the council tax payer is forced to cover the delinquent owner's legal expenses.

A challenge to these norms would provide a fruitful way for ministers to turn their rhetoric about empowering places into reality, by identifying and overcoming enemies of well-being,

40 'High Street Rental Auctions: Non-statutory guidance', MHCLG, updated 5 June 2025

both in the form of specific owners who exemplify vested interests, and of the ideas that shield them.

2. Capacity support

Where the rental auction process has worked, government has provided funding for cash-strapped councils to cover the costs, such as agents' fees and having a property physically opened – something for which Pride in Place money might sensibly be used. Many local authorities also lack the capacity in skills and staffing to initiate a rental auction process. This is a good example of where secondment of civil servants might help bring liberating expertise and confidence. This would also develop the expertise of the secondees in managing this process, who could then carry that to other authorities.

However, the impact of this would be limited to the local authorities concerned. The public policy consultant James Plunkett, founder of the Kinship Works network, recommends instead the creation of a unit which would include civil servants on its staff, but would work as a nationwide specialist service provider, helping local authorities to manage processes such as compulsory purchase orders.

3. Legal reassurance

Local authorities are also unwilling to initiate rental auctions because of the fear of costly legal action by the owners concerned. It is in the interests of central as well as local government that the new legislation is put to effective use. On that basis, it would make sense for central government to provide financial reassurance to those councils willing to fight early test cases. The putative specialist unit outlined above could also provide legal guidance to reassure councils, in cases where the risk of successful legal challenge is low. (Government has provided some funding to help councils do this, including for legal costs.) This would be in line with the spirit of the attorney general's new, less risk-averse legal guidance, designed to enable ministers to pursue policies even in the face of likely litigation.[41]

The Treasury could also underwrite the local authority's legal costs in the event that it lost. To ensure this caused no great addition to fiscal pressure or any open-ended spending commitment, this could be done on a case-by-case basis. This would help councils clear the initial fear hurdle. Jessica Craig casts this as a one-off de-risking capital investment to help prove the process works, to demonstrate the positive social and economic outcome, and so to build authorities' experience, capacity and confidence, not least at senior levels.

41 G. Scott, S. Swinford, '"Take more legal risks" to speed up government, ministers told', *Times*, 7 September 2026.

Use existing local institutions and structures

As we've seen, one advantage of setting a clear goal is that it allows for greater devolution of specific decision-making to the local level without detracting from the programme's overall coherence. This could also licence one of the changes several interviewees called for: making greater use of existing local institutions.

MHCLG guidance on Pride in Place does encourage a place-responsive approach, using existing structures.[42] However, in practice, critics suggest, this has often been trumped by two bad Whitehall habits. First, 'blank-page-ism': an instinct to start from scratch, the better to build a programme that fits nationally-set parameters. And second, 'announcement-itis': the desire to announce and build new initiatives and buildings, at the launch of which politicians can be photographed smiling.

One aspect of this is the role of existing local institutions – not least those initiated under the New Deal for Communities – and other anchor institutions. Based on her fieldwork in struggling post-industrial towns in the East Midlands, the sociologist Sacha Hilhorst has drawn attention to the way that nurses are often the bedrock of local progressive politics, and therefore suggests using Pride in Place capital funding to retrofit iconic local buildings as nursing colleges.

Another aspect of this is the invisibility from afar of informal local structures, such as a GP around whom people unite, and networks of neighbours and friends. Based on recent work with a London council, Lucy Webb calls for paying greater attention to 'those informal group structures that are preventing people from entering into crisis' on the grounds that these are 'absolutely critical to the resilience of that community'. On this basis, programmes like Pride in Place 'shouldn't be all about boosting the formal institutions, but thinking about investment in those more informal ones that actually probably are having a deeper impact, because of their trusted relationships with those that are more likely to head towards crisis or need intervention'.

MHCLG guidance recognises the worth of 'community groups, grassroots organisations, and faith organisations with trusted relationships and networks' as a means 'to reach different parts of the community'.[43] Informal structures have value beyond that, however, and could themselves usefully be bolstered through Pride in Place funding. This is only possible if the frameworks imposed from London are flexible enough, in practice, to permit this. Instead of using the money to hire community engagement specialists to develop plans, revenue funding could be used to build the capacity of local people to participate in decision-making. Webb highlights the challenge of individuals with creative contributions to make who cannot even attend the meetings where their voice might be heard, because 'they are struggling to pay a bus fare or they have no time, and someone needs to look after

42 See for example, Guidance: Pride in Place Programme: prospectus, MHCLG, updated 20 March 2026. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pride-in-place-programme-prospectus/pride-in-place-programme-prospectus ('We know the challenges in places vary' and 'Community-led delivery will look different from place to place, and the pathway to get there will vary too.')

43 Guidance: Pride in Place Programme: prospectus, MHCLG, updated 20 March 2026; see also 'we encourage consideration of appropriate local voluntary and charity organisations to provide opportunities to maximise existing networks' in Guidance: Plan for Neighbourhoods: governance and boundary guidance, MHCLG, 12 March 2025.

their children.' There is a need, she suggests, 'for stipends or payments to actually get people involved', but this is 'constantly overlooked'. These approaches would also improve the long-term resilience of initiatives and buildings funded by Pride in Place by embedding them in the community's sense of what constitutes normal life – such that any political party that wants those voters' support will need to commit to sustaining those institutions.

All of this presents risks: local institutions can be a magnet for the loud voices and sharp elbows against which the MHCLG guidance rightly warns. They should not be allowed to undermine the standing of the local authority. In areas where the existing systems are strong and successful, there may be much less need for this approach. And, as is also true at a national level, local institutions are at permanent risk of losing sight of their founding aims. As Chris Naylor, a former local authority chief executive, observes, they can even become financial support systems for people whose livelihoods come to depend on this, based on overly long-standing relationships with officials and councillors.

The test here, as with the programme as a whole, is whether the institution has a clear sense of its purpose. Just as we should be more willing to create new institutions, we should be readier to recognise when they have fulfilled their purpose, and abolish them.

Addressing public distrust

Establishing a single, vivid, compelling goal for Pride in Place would also help to address the deeply entrenched public distrust that anything is really going to get better, whatever passing politicians say. As we've seen, communicating improvement effectively is particularly difficult when the tangible results of the programme are local, small and scattered across the country.

Communications as narration

A single, simply-stated goal would allow the government to start building a more coherent communications strategy. However, this would also require a fundamental break from the existing announcement-driven model. This has its roots in the 1990s, and seems to have become less and less effective, as critics such as Sam Freedman have argued in some detail. Breaking from it, therefore, ought not to be impossible.[44]

The shift required is to see communications around Pride in Place as narration. Our politics' lack of storytelling is endlessly lamented, but this notion rarely seems to be translated into clear thinking about what stories are. That is, heroines and heroes overcoming obstacles and defeating villains to achieve a hard-won goal. In this instance, the heroic people of Britain, aided by their government, striving to overcome cynicism, despair, vested interests and lack of resources in order to rescue their cherished neighbourhoods. With this as the frame, each individual tiny win could be pulled by the government's communications professionals as part of a single story of struggle against the odds.

This would also allow the government to emphasise that the programme is working to the benefit of a wide range of places, boosting businesses as well as workers, and people across a wide range of interests and demographics. This approach would dovetail well with the use of vertical video clips, at which the prime minister and increasing numbers of MPs are adept. These could easily be given some stylistic unity and pulled together once a week to illustrate the latest stage in our story.

However, this narrative approach must also help to ensure that such videos do not constantly ape the clunky techniques of the news reporter's piece to camera, and that MPs addressing the public this way don't strain constantly to be Positive and Pleased to Be Here Today. Zohran Mamdani's videos are not only successful because he has charisma; they work because they play with form as a way of making people smile, rather than just smiling at them.

Speak the same language

Communicating Pride in Place could be improved by recognising that members of the public see the levers of policy differently to policymakers and politicians; it is therefore advisable not to talk to them as though they are economists. For example, many people do not necessarily make the connection between a given government action and its outcome – seeing no link between the cost of policing and levels of crime, for example, or between certain forms of infrastructure investment and eventually feeling more prosperous. This is exacerbated by the way that the media and social media have long encouraged people to see policy as analogous to shopping – where the result can reasonably be expected to be

44 'The Random Announcement Generator: How PR became more important than policy', in S. Freedman, *Failed State: Why Nothing Works and How We Fix It*, 2024, 229-32

immediate, and the outcome should be judged solely by whether it is directly to the satisfaction of a given individual. Here too, a compelling narrative might be helpful in changing expectations and making necessary connections. Those charged with communicating Pride in Place might also usefully consider their use of language and visuals, given that many of those it is most important to reach may not have a computer, but will have a smartphone. Not everyone routinely uploads text-heavy pdfs.

Routes in

Relying on trusted community figures to communicate something of what Pride in Place is doing – such as faith leaders, sports leaders, hairdressers and indeed councillors themselves – is one obvious but perhaps under-recognised way to reach people. Sacha Hilhorst is among those who argue that people who run local fundraisers on Facebook to help neighbours in crisis are often stalwarts of their community more broadly, and are worth coaxing towards a role in Pride in Place. This is an approach with which some MPs are experimenting.

Given the near-terminal decay of local journalism, Patrick Hurley points to the potential utility of a project developed in New York (by a Liverpudlian): a weekly email, funded by hyperlocal advertising, which plays the role once performed by the local press. He argues that, had something similar been established in Southport at the time of the riots in summer 2024, able to act as a 'trusted, neutral, calm, but fast-moving news source', it might have undercut the effectiveness of the online disinformation and misinformation which sparked the violence. Pride in Place revenue funds, he suggests, could be used to employ young people as journalists on such projects.

One of Hurley's fellow Labour MPs argues that to escape the suspicions identified in Part 1, a fundamental shift is needed. They point to the American non-profit executive Heather McGhee's study *The Sum of Us*: *What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (2021), which notes how many white Americans, particularly in the South, have been stuck in zero-sum thinking, to the point that some preferred to concrete over a public swimming pool rather than share it with their black fellow citizens. The way out of this mindset comes when people are 'offered a plausible path to future abundance'. This MP suggests that there should be no expectation that those engaging with Pride in Place must set aside their mutual suspicions – better to encourage them to work together despite that, and so work towards a greater understanding of each other's fears, than to try to achieve that first.

A project run in Grimsby before the last general election illustrates several of these themes in action, and their potential utility:

- clarity of purpose;
- the need for an active state to facilitate devolution of power;
- the importance of distinguishing necessary from unnecessary risk aversion;
- the role of honesty about limits and restrictions in building trust.

This project, run by Vidhya Alakeson and Peter Hyman, involved convening a group of '20 local powerbrokers' and asking them what Labour's missions for government would mean in their town.[45] This involved an honest account of the restrictions involved – similar to the fiscal constraints crystallised in the capital-revenue ratio. This suggests that levelling with people about the reasons for these restrictions is more effective than telling them they can do anything, then explaining why they can't. If clarifying the direct connection between these constraints and the fiscal rules at a national level proves frustrating to people, that at least forms the basis for political action.

45 P. Hyman, 'Keir Starmer must remember his mission', *New Statesman*, 30 November 2024.

On the basis of these conversations, the group drew up a plan. This underlined on the one hand how much agency the group had, and on the other, that there were a few areas where they needed government help: unlocking capital, and dealing with planning and regulation systems.

Alakeson argues that, had this process been sustained once Labour entered government, it would have involved the group working to translate the five national missions into a local mission for Grimsby, and government collaborating with them to help them achieve it. This approach could also have been replicated in other areas.

The Grimsby project covered a larger area than Pride in Place. Nonetheless, it points to the role government could play in partnering with places to support them in achieving their goals, and ensuring that those goals align with a coherent, agreed, national objective.

Conclusion

With Pride in Place, the Starmer government focused on the right problem. Those involved set about tackling it by sensible and sensitive means. But such efforts have been hampered, in this as in many other policy areas, by a failure to formulate a clear goal as part of an overarching political project. Because Starmer's government did not achieve this clarity of thought, the programme could not identify or overcome the underlying structural and ideological barriers that stand in the way of truly transforming our neglected neighbourhoods.

The Burnham government has taken office with a much clearer sense of its overall governing mission. If it can use this to define more clearly and compellingly the purpose of Pride in Place, drawing on the lessons of its early stages, it has a greater chance of working with communities to foster deep-rooted change. But only if it also develops a much clearer picture of the limits that have thus far prevented that, the ideas that underpin those limits, and the scale of rethinking required to overcome them.

Pride in Place was announced as 'the largest transfer of power from Whitehall to communities in history'. To make that transfer a reality, it is vital to think structurally about power.