

FABIAN POLICY REPORT

Local Trust
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COMMUNITIES IN CONTROL

Pushing power down to spread prosperity out

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Local Trust is a leading place-based funder and thought leader supporting communities to achieve their ambitions. The charity was established in 2012 to deliver Big Local, which is the largest ever national experiment in neighbourhood level devolution and community regeneration.



This new Fabian Society pamphlet, in partnership with Local Trust, explores how by pushing power and funding down and out into neighbourhoods, we can help solve some of the biggest challenges facing the country over the next decade. It seeks to flesh out Keir Starmer's vision of a society that ensures "local people are in charge of the resources – and the opportunities – to improve their own communities." Because by pushing power down, you spread prosperity out.

In this edited collection, the Fabians have brought together a diverse array of community power advocates, policy experts and parliamentarians. They each focus on a particular policy challenge facing the country – such as creating good jobs for all, reaching net zero, rebuilding our social fabric, and tackling pervasive inequalities between places – and explore the significant role that community power can play in solving them. We warmly welcome their contributions and hope the publication helps to advance the case for community-led solutions.

– *Matt Leach, chief executive, Local Trust*

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Pride of place

Pride in the places we call home is often tinged with sadness that things could be better. By working together, they can be, writes *Lisa Nandy MP*



For decades, the communities that used to power our country have only got the crumbs from the table. Too many places have been the losers in our economic settlement. Many of them are post-industrial and coastal towns, where good jobs have gone and have never been replaced. That has meant young people have had to get out to get on, moving far away from their homes and their loved ones just to find decent opportunities.

The spending power that leaves with them causes high streets to collapse, local institutions to decay and transport networks to close down. The people left behind are ageing, miles away from their children and grandchildren. They feel the aftershocks in every part of their life.

Across Britain we are proud of the places we call home. But it is a love and pride often tinged with despair and sadness. This feeling is palpable on high streets, in work-

places and in the local pubs of the places that once powered this country. For these communities, that sense of contribution to our national story outweighed even their pay and conditions; it gave entire places pride and purpose.

This profound sense of decline was not inevitable, and it is not irreversible. Building a new Britain must be about putting this right, creating prosperity by matching the ambition of people who want to see their rightful place restored. This mission must have at its heart a focus on spreading opportunity, prosperity and power across the country.

In plain terms that means putting money back into people's pockets with good jobs and good wages, so that young people have choices and chances to thrive in their hometowns. Every pound that goes into the pocket of someone earning a living wage goes back out into shops and businesses, rebuilding the foundations of the local economy and allowing high streets and town centres to survive.

Across Britain we are proud of the places we call home. But it is a love and pride often tinged with despair and sadness



But this is also about empowering people to take control of their lives. At the moment, too many people are faced with either limited options, or a binary choice between family and home versus opportunity and work.

Instead, power and resources should lie as close to people as possible, so we have the ability to shape our lives as we need to.

Empowerment means the ability to build our communities in a way that best serves us, recognising differences between different places. It means having the opportunity to strengthen and deepen the social fabric that binds our neighbourhoods together – the pubs, the local business, the post offices and banks, and the buses.

It means having a real sense of control over where we live, and the decisions that affect our lives.

We in our communities know better what we need than mandarins in far-off offices; where politicians too often see

Our towns and villages should be better connected to jobs, opportunities, our family and our friends through good transport, digital infrastructure and affordable housing that we have too often been denied

problems, communities see solutions. So we should have more choice over how the assets and resources in our communities are used.

The recognition of this simple truth should not be controversial, nor should it be difficult to achieve, but switching to this approach would be a fundamental break from the status quo, a shifting of the mindset that has dominated Westminster politics for generations.

When done well, the rewards of empowering communities are plain to see - just look at places like Grimsby, Preston and Wigan where businesses, community leaders and colleges have been rebuilding Britain from the ground up.





Why shouldn't young people in those places still have the opportunity to power us through the next century as their parents and grandparents powered us through the last?

In Preston, the council has developed its assets to build wealth in the community and keep it local. The Wigan Deal is a contract between the council and the people that protects the things that matter to people – like libraries, leisure centres and clean streets – in return for increased volunteering, recycling rates, and fostering and adoption.

In Grimsby, the last regional development agency had the foresight to invest in wind energy, leveraging in private investment to create jobs and apprenticeships for Grimsby's young people. From the Grimsby docks, they powered the world. Within

living memory there are so many places in Britain that did this too. Why shouldn't young people in those places still have the opportunity to power us through the next century as their parents and grandparents powered us through the last?

So, if levelling up means anything, it must deliver good jobs in our hometowns, so young people have choices and chances and do not have to get out to get on; where our high streets are thriving because the local economy is thriving; with good local businesses and money in people's pockets.

Our towns and villages should be better connected to jobs, opportunities, our family

and our friends through good transport, digital infrastructure and affordable housing that we have too often been denied.

Our town centres should be safe and welcoming instead of plagued by anti-social behaviour, with criminals being let off and victims let down.

People do not need money to restore pride in their communities, the pride has always been there. We need a real plan that puts back what has been lost, and with it the power to make decisions for ourselves in the future.

We can do this, but only if we do it together.

Lisa Nandy is the Labour MP for Wigan and shadow secretary of state for levelling up, housing and communities

A shared endeavour

As a priority the next Labour government must strengthen the social fabric of our communities, writes *Matt Leach*



In his first speech of 2022, Keir Starmer spoke of his ambition “to build a nation from the common bonds between us. Our high streets, our community centres, our places of worship, the spaces we share.” And he proposed a contract with the British people that included a commitment that “everyone has the right to live in places we care for and to have our lives and ambitions taken seriously to be valued for who we are and what we do.”

Place and community are vitally important – they provide us with belonging, connection and a sense of collective identity. Whilst harder to measure than unemployment or GDP, the social capital embedded in a community is often as important to how people feel about their day-to-day lives as the state of the local economy.

There is clearly a pressing need to address financial hardship across the country – particularly in the context of a rapidly accelerating cost of living crisis. But if Labour’s aspiration is also to build a country defined by the quality of the bonds between us, success will not simply be measured solely in terms of how well we tackle economic challenges, but also by how we feel about the communities in which we live.

There is a good evidence base on which to build. Local Trust research – and more recently that of the all-party parliamentary

group for ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods – has consistently identified startling disparities in levels of social infrastructure between communities. By social infrastructure we mean the building blocks of social capital in a neighbourhood – places to meet, shared spaces, the existence of local community institutions.

Place and community are vitally important – they provide us with belonging, connection and a sense of collective identity

Many of the communities most affected are situated in post-industrial areas. In many cases this is because they lie at the periphery of our towns and cities, lacking the visibility and voice, or the transport links or land value that might be harnessed to support their regeneration. Disproportionately they fall into what has become known as the ‘Red Wall’.

These are not places lacking in pride or identity. But with industrial decline came the loss of many of the institutions that were central to community life, and with them relationships, collective initiatives and wider social activity.

Whilst the headlines when the pits, steelworks or foundry closed might have

focused on the loss of employment, the longer-term costs to many of those communities was the disappearance of a much wider swathe of the social fabric that helped define community identity and provided a voice for local people’s aspirations and a focus for shared endeavour.

In many areas the spending cuts of the last decade have made things worse, with reductions or closures of community centres, libraries and other shared public spaces. And that loss can risk creating a negative spiral of inequality. Recent research by the APPG for ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods showed that communities that lacked social infrastructure provided by local community institutions received some 70 per cent less charitable and lottery grant funding per head of the population, when compared to other equally deprived communities.

With less capacity to self-organise, these communities risk falling even further behind. But this is not just about doing the right thing by local people, it is also the right thing to do economically. Recent research from Frontier Economics has shown that investing in community-led social infrastructure in ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods more than pays for itself in terms of economic returns to the Treasury and improvements in the wellbeing of local residents.

In addressing this challenge, Labour has a strong record on which to build.

Tony Blair’s first speech as prime minister, on the Aylesbury estate in June 1997, focused on the need to ‘recreate the bonds of community’, partly to tackle ‘the desperate need for urban regeneration’. Richard Rogers was appointed to lead an Urban Task Force intended to catalyse an ‘urban renaissance’. And the New Deal for Communities (NDC) that followed sought to support the radical improvement of communities at a neighbourhood level on a scale that had rarely been seen before.

Looking back, not all elements of the

programme were successful. Whilst some areas did improve, others continued to struggle. But recent analysis of progress in NDC areas shows, overwhelmingly, that the original aspirations for the programme were sound. At their heart, New Labour's regeneration and renewal policies prioritised the need for active local citizenship and community participation. And it is clear from long-term evaluations of that investment that where communities were most strongly in the lead in defining and delivering the regeneration of their communities, the impact of NDC was strongest and sustained for the longest time.

Looking forward, Labour needs to draw on that inspiration as it sets out a new plan capable of revitalising our most deprived neighbourhoods. However, if the focus of urban policy in the 1990s was around renewing the physical fabric of our inner cities, its agenda for the 2020s should be about renewal of the social fabric of our communities.

Three key elements should lie at its heart.

First, Labour must build the capacity of those 'left behind' areas where civic life has declined because of deindustrialisation, loss of key assets, peripherality, location and chronic deprivation.

Second, it must create a clear policy priority to maximise the contribution of every 'community' to local life. This should be recognised as being core to our quality of life, alongside an effective state and a thriving market. This is not advocating for another 'big society' in which public services are transferred to charities, with or without funding. Rather it is a recognition that stronger communities, better relationships, and a shared collective identity founded around place leads to lower social failure costs and higher life satisfaction for everyone.

And third, there needs to be a rebalancing of power between state and community, perhaps, as some have advocated, through

a Community Power Act which recognises that our society is over-centralised. Instead, power needs to be spread, with local people making more decisions about their own localities and taking back control.

Labour knows from its history that power is created by local people themselves, through association and collective action



But that on its own is not enough. Labour knows from its history that power is created by local people themselves, through association and collective action.

To transform 'left behind' areas, we need long-term investment in building capacity and confidence at a local level, rebooting local civil society, maximising the potential of local people, establishing organisations and starting to take on assets that will sustain them into the long term. Effectively helping them level up civic life.

This needs slow, sustainable, long-term funding and considerable support of the kind advocated by the current campaign for a community wealth fund, which Labour has committed to support. The role of government here would be to help set up structures and funding streams drawing on the new wave of dormant assets.

To maximise the contributions that community and civil society make to local life, we should look to support the development of more community businesses; help local community organisations secure

assets and maximise value from them, addressing the problems of the government's currently stalled community ownership fund; and seek to use other policy and funding levers to provide opportunities to grow local civic institutions.

This might come from retargeting the UK shared prosperity fund to changing planning rules. It should be about creating a shared mission between government, quangos and local government – helping establish programmes and change approaches in ways that maximise the extent to which community in its broadest sense thrives.

And where community is already thriving – with strong civic life, active organisations that bring together local people, large-scale volunteering, and the capacity to make decisions through neighbourhood forums or parish councils – there might be a discussion with local government about formally devolving power to local organisations and institutions. Long term, this could be to formal bodies like parishes and forums, but in the shorter term to development trusts and community organisations, where formal accountability is less important than getting stuff done and getting people involved.

But all of this needs leadership. The last Labour government created a neighbourhood renewal unit to support local communities achieve change, whilst itself coordinating and driving policy advancements across Whitehall. Recent years have seen the disappearance of that capacity within government.

A new neighbourhoods and communities unit should be established to help coordinate across Whitehall, gather data, share what works and drive policy. Building a nation based on common bonds and founded on powerful communities needs to be more than just a slogan, but a mission for an incoming Labour government.

Matt Leach is chief executive of Local Trust

Getting it right

Labour must work to ensure its community power agenda is comprehensive and inclusive, argues *Luke Raikes*



If Labour forms the next government it will face monumental challenges. The party will be repairing the untold damage done to the state and will need to safeguard the country against future crises. It will also need to shape and curtail the market economy to adapt to a turbulent world, with the kind of powerful industrial and regional policies it has historically neglected. For the most part, Labour will change lives for the better by using the state to deliver services and regulate markets. And if it wants to be elected again, the party must prove it can deliver.

But what is the role of community in the society Labour wants to build? Does the party even believe in society or does it think it is the same as ‘the state’ – as David Cameron famously implied?

Labour, of course, has a strong, historic relationship with the values and ideals of community. The party was born from the hard necessity of coming together to fight for better working conditions and build a better life, back when support from the state was threadbare and the market economy was truly merciless. As any member knows, long before Labour was

founded as a party of government, its roots grew up from community organisations – the trade unions, working men’s clubs and cooperatives.

But this is ancient history: a lot has changed and nostalgia will get the party nowhere. We have seen unprecedented social, economic and technological progress since the 19th century. Moreover, Labour has helped to build a large state and worked to curtail the worst excesses of the market – though, of course, that work is far from over. So, in a world with such a big state and a more regulated market, where do old ideals of ‘community’ and agendas like ‘community power’ fit?

On this, Labour can learn from its experience in government. In all but name, community power was a major part of the ‘new localism’ agenda that the Westminster Labour government pursued in England between 2001 and 2010. At its apogee, it was the New Deal for Communities – though there are strong opinions on either side on the success of this programme – and, toward the end of New Labour, this agenda acquired the clunky term ‘double devolution’. But Labour has more recent experience of community power. From opposition in Westminster, the party has seen the Conservatives’ own attempts to pursue a more community-focused agenda fall apart due to incoherence and austerity, particularly embodied in two words that still haunt our politics: ‘big society’.

Even now, Labour often has a ‘community’ related agenda where it is in power – in councils and mayoralities, and in Wales. And Labour’s sister party, the Co-operative party, is a strong, practical force within the movement, with its principles being applied on the ground across the country.

There is much to learn from Labour’s history and current practice, then. But an incoming Labour government, facing such major challenges, will need to stress-test this agenda, both politically and in terms of its on-the-ground impact on people’s lives.



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Three priorities for a Labour community power agenda

There are three ways Labour could look to develop a comprehensive and inclusive community power agenda.

1. Labour must be clear about what community power is, its role and its limitations

Community power is a broad and multi-faceted agenda. It comes alive when defined, as it often is, by examples of excluded communities being included and empowered. This breadth highlights good practice and amplifies the good contribution of 'community' in its many forms.

But the term can be so all-encompassing that it sometimes loses definition. It can be used to refer to an agenda ranging from giving grants to community groups, to working with the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector, to technocratic social value reforms (ie community wealth building). Stepping back, it can feel unclear as to what exactly all these initiatives have in common – other than an association with the word 'community', which is defined very differently in each case.

In contrast to the small scale at which community power works in practice, its rhetoric is often expansive and ambitious. Every day, citizens, charities, businesses and public servants face acute challenges. There are vast, powerful and complex economic and public policy problems that need tackling, from the climate crisis, to scarce public resources, political dilemmas and powerful vested interests. Our social bonds have frayed and we have arguably become more individualistic and atomised.

Community power, as a policy agenda, can help with some of this. But our recent experience of austerity has highlighted how important the state is in providing the social infrastructure we all rely on. In practice, then, community power would work best as part of a much bigger policy programme and it should not be crow-



barred in where it is not needed. Labour must be clear about what community power is, its role and its limitations. There are many valuable approaches within this broad agenda, but Labour must be more precise and differentiate between them.

In each case, Labour must cut through the jargon and rhetoric, talk in terms that engage with the whole community, and set out a clearly defined role where working with the 'community', in its many forms and definitions, does add value, while managing expectations about what it can achieve. And, of course, a Labour community power agenda must work with, not supplant, a re-energised, better funded and more agile state.

2. Labour must put equal power at the heart of community power

Representative democracy can feel disempowering, while representatives and agencies of the state can act in an unaccountable and even discriminatory way. In response, many community power initiatives give power to people who rarely wield it, and this can be incredibly positive.

But community power can raise its own challenges around inequality, power and participation. People with experience of community power have noted an uncom-

fortable truth: in the wrong hands, and if done poorly, such initiatives do not resolve imbalances in power. They can actually reinforce them.

There can be barriers to participation in community projects: people who care for children, relatives or friends and people who work unsociable hours, for instance, will often be unable to attend meetings. No less important are the more subtle but powerful barriers to participation: people feeling like a meeting 'isn't for them' – because it has been set up in the image of its organisers, not the community. In the wrong hands, community power can exacerbate the exclusion of poorer people, working-class people, young people, ethnic minority communities and those with disabilities.

Labour must put equal power at the heart of community power. This is possible: organisers can reach out and encourage participation; meetings can be conducted in places and in ways which are more inclusive. Community leaders need support to work inclusively and best practice needs to be shared to make this a reality. Labour must learn from its experience when last in government, and initiatives since.

But this inclusion cannot be tokenistic, 'box ticking', experimental or 'nice to have'.

Such programmes must be rooted in the idea of unequal power and actively seek to address it from the outset. Labour must be clear that, unless they meet this standard, projects are not true to their community power ideals, and they should not proceed unless they are.

3. Labour should advance a comprehensive programme of community and democratic empowerment

What kind of power should which community have? As noted above, community power often refers to a range of initiatives in practice, including forms of direct democracy; co-opted individuals or volunteers participating in the governance or delivery of projects; or simply funding VCSE organisations to deliver public services. These can all be incredibly positive in their own ways.

However, each of these raises separate, important questions of the kind of power they would exercise. Bringing community members and charities into the governance or delivery of public services can often improve those services. But it is, of course, not the same as community empowerment – participants are not accountable representatives who can indirectly empower the wider community.

Forms of direct democracy are a useful tool to resolve thorny political issues – but they are not a magic bullet; they only empower those involved, and can only ever have an advisory role.

VCSE organisations can also be rooted in a place, trusted by the community and in some cases they are more nimble and effective than the state in delivering services to the public. But they are community organisations, not the community itself.

All of these initiatives can improve services, but those involved are not the community, and nor can they claim, in any democratic sense, to represent the community. Therefore, to be legitimate, any power they have must be delegated from, and ac-

countable to, local or national government.

Local government reform should therefore be an important part of the community power agenda. To the public, the word community likely means all citizens within a place or group. And, while our democracy is far from perfect, most adults have an equal role in electing representatives, and have equal rights they can enforce. We have established processes of representative democracy which do the formal and accountable work of representing communities. This offers the most legitimate and fairest route to empower people democratically.

But our representative democracy is in dire need of transformation. It is often unresponsive, and unequally responsive. Elections themselves often have low turnout, and between elections, there are few opportunities for the public to hold representatives to account effectively. Power is centralised in Westminster with few checks and balances, which means that swathes of the country are lumbered with an incompetent government, led by a party their community has never elected and cannot hold to account.

Labour should advance a comprehensive programme of community and democratic empowerment. It must radically devolve power to councils and mayoral combined authorities, and reform the formal role of councillors, addressing their role at the neighbourhood level, through to councils, mayoralities and pan-regional bodies – implementing robust checks and balances, ensuring representatives are more responsive, and making structures more inclusive and transparent.

Labour should also develop a broad range of community power initiatives to complement representative democracy. The party could enable a range of initiatives, from providing the funding to take dormant assets into community hands, as Local Trust has recommended, to citizens' assemblies, which can provide valuable advice to ac-

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Labour must be a party of power in every sense of the word. It must end the disempowerment that people experience on a daily basis, whether it lurks menacingly in the background, or is very tangible and specific to their experience. Labour must understand the relationship citizens have with different forms of power: as workers with eroding employment rights; as consumers facing confusing choices; as citizens, voting (or not voting) in elections, where they feel their vote does not count. The party simply cannot shy away from a very real discussion of the unequal power people face, whether due to an inflexible, impersonal state, or a globalised market economy.

It might be old-fashioned to spell it out, but the primary way Labour will address disempowerment is by being a party in power, and in control of the state: representing communities, making decisions, changing laws and delivering services.

But Labour cannot lose touch. It must empower communities by reforming local representative democracy and working closely and inclusively with communities to deliver policy. If it gets this right, Labour can empower as well as deliver – and improve lives both *for* communities, and *with* communities, across the country.

Luke Raikes is research director at the Fabian Society

The sooner the better

A community-powered approach to healthcare would keep people healthier and save our NHS from spiralling further downwards. *Donna Hall* explains



Mark Spencer is a GP who has completely reinvented his role. Tired of sitting in his surgery day after day prescribing medicines to the same people with the same conditions, he decided to get out into the community and talk to them about what needed to change.

The result was Healthier Fleetwood – a remarkable flowering of multiple community-led groups to improve the health and wellbeing of people in a coastal town that has struggled for years with poverty and deprivation. The groups cover a wide range of issues from men’s mental health to obesity. But they all share one thing in common: they use the power of human connection and support to prevent illness in the first place rather than simply manage it. This is why there are groups dedicated simply to singing or crafts as a way of keeping people mentally and physically healthy as well as those more directly focused on ‘conditions’.

[The community-led groups] use the power of human connection and support to prevent illness in the first place rather than simply manage it

Mark is now as much a community organiser, leader and adviser as he is the classic GP with a stethoscope and prescription pad. The results speak for themselves: reduced obesity, falling admissions to A&E (pre-Covid), a doubling of GP numbers made possible by more sustainable finances - and, most importantly, dozens of stories of people’s lives transformed, even saved, by being part of a Healthier Fleetwood group.



Mark is not alone – there are similar initiatives in Surrey, Stockport, Barrow and Pimlico. They all draw on the idea of community-powered prevention, which inspired programmes in Wigan and Bolton too, of which I have personal experience. In Wigan, the shift in culture and practices, as well as more investment in community groups, raised life expectancy (despite similar areas experiencing a decline) and, according to a King’s Fund study, significantly improved social care outcomes while simultaneously saving money.

But such efforts are still too few and far between. The NHS is overwhelmingly a paternalistic organisation that mostly seeks to treat illness within the healthcare institution rather than prevent it out in the community. This was barely sustainable before the pandemic but is proving catastrophic after it.

Demand for NHS care has been rising non-stop for years. Covid-19 massively ramped up that demand in the short term but as it now becomes endemic, another long-term pressure has been

added to the capacity and finances of the service. Very sadly, according to a series of scientific studies, it seems highly likely that there will be further pandemics with the same outcome. The consequences of this are already clear. Healthcare delayed, effectively rationed and in some cases abandoned altogether. And a growing divide between those who can afford to pay for care and those who cannot. The risk grows every day that, at some point, charging for certain services will be introduced just to maintain capacity and then the founding vision of a free, universal and effective health service in the UK will have been lost.

The response from governments over many years to this spiralling crisis has been woeful. Rather than fundamentally rethink the NHS's overemphasis on acute care, money has been ploughed into the service simply to keep pace with rising demand. Worse, there have been efforts at change driven more by ideology – such as the Lansley reforms – than by the actual challenges facing the healthcare system. Most egregious, however, has been the 24 per cent cut to public health budgets since 2015 highlighted by the Health Foundation – decimating the one part of the system that is entirely focused on prevention.

There is no doubt that the NHS needs better funding but that alone is not going to be enough to deal with rising demand effectively or humanely. As well as money, we need a fundamental and urgent rethink of the way we do healthcare to make community-powered prevention a foundational, well-resourced and valued part of the system. And we know from New Local's work on community power across the public sector and in the NHS what that would look like.

It would mean much greater involvement of communities in the strategic decisions taken by local healthcare systems. Local government is pioneering



There needs to be a focus on making sure communities have the networks and capabilities to stop people getting ill and support them when they do

this approach with increasing use of deliberative, consensus-building processes such as citizens' assemblies and open conversation. There is no reason why the NHS cannot do the same.

It would mean a new community-powered way of delivering services that stops seeing patients as problems or cases that need to be managed or processed. Instead there needs to be a focus on making sure communities have the networks and capabilities to stop people getting ill and support them when they do.

Equally, the healthcare system needs to be deeply connected to these communities and working within them. Patients must

be seen as connected humans first and a medical condition second. Of course, none of this detracts from the ongoing need for excellent acute care when it is required but if we do not develop a model that prevents acute care being needed (often repeatedly by the same people) then that excellence will inevitably decline.

And finally, and most importantly, it requires a huge shift in the organisational culture of the NHS.

We need a mindset in the service which recognises that clinical expertise is most effective at promoting health when it is combined with the inherent understanding, energy and assets present within the communities the NHS serves. The notion of the NHS solely as this vast repository of expertise which is dispensed from on high with individualised, passive patients has to go. That change is vital because in a body as large as the NHS and in an area as complex as healthcare, no single order from above nor programme of change can account for all the shifts that need to occur to deliver community-powered prevention. It is a shift that has to be owned by every member of NHS staff. Equally,

profound change and impact in any organisation is driven by values, mindset and behaviours. It is why Westminster's obsession with constantly reordering the structures of the service rather than its culture has proved so ineffective.

It is therefore frustrating that the latest change to the NHS is yet another restructure in the form of the integrated care systems (ICSs). However, the opportunity should be seized to make ICSs leaders of community-powered transformation. Their chief goal may be service integration but their focus on place and on population health provides a great chance to develop comprehensive health and wellbeing plans for whole areas. These would not only span a range of public sector bodies but would also work with communities in the fundamentally different way outlined above. Sadly, the recent White Paper on health and service care integration continued the focus on institutional restructuring but had little to say about the crucial role of communities.

It stands to reason that an approach based so much on the community has to happen at the local level. But central government still has two vital roles to play.

The first is to be a champion of a community-powered approach – to make it clear that this is the shift that needs to occur. Westminster should adopt the ideas developed by the We're Right Here campaign which is calling for a major piece of legislation – a Community Power Act – to strengthen the rights of local communities and require public services to develop plans for delivery and change that work with those local communities.

A community-powered, preventative approach is no longer just a more effective and humane model, it is a vital necessity

The second is more demanding. It is to work closely with the NHS, local government, other services, and most importantly communities, to design, fund and implement programmes that finally get to grips with the main cause of ill-health: poverty and deprivation. As Michael Marmot has detailed in his influential reports, the evidence is overwhelming that all the factors associated with poverty – poor housing, low educational attainment and family breakdown amongst others – are the main driver of preventable illness. Communities working with local services can undoubtedly go some way to address these but without the funding and regulatory power of central government they can only go so far.

To his credit, Keir Starmer is getting the message that central government has a role to play in community-powered health. His speech at the Fabian Society's new year conference this January showcased a commitment to weave our health service into our communities with a focus on wellbeing.

Community power as an idea is not new. Particularly in healthcare, there have always been alternative models to the over-medicalised, top-down, institution-led approach that gripped advanced economies during the 20th century. But now, as we face relentlessly rising pressure on the NHS, a community-powered, preventative approach is no longer just a more effective and humane model, it is a vital necessity if we are to preserve the universal, high quality, free service that has become such a cornerstone of British life. The sooner we get to it, the better we'll be.

Donna Hall is chair of New Local and chair of Bolton NHS Foundation Trust. She was formerly chief executive of Wigan council



Homes for all

Can giving communities a greater say deliver more homes and a solution to the housing crisis? *Chris Worrall* explores



Britain has a housing crisis caused by a shortage of homes. England currently adds to its housing stock between 220,000 to 240,000 new homes a year – a historic high in this country. But it is far less than the 340,000 extra homes in France built every year. Since the 1980s house prices have also risen faster in Britain than almost anywhere else in the world, and we have among the lowest vacancy rates in Europe. We must build more homes to fix this.

Many people are happy to say “yes in my back yard” to more housing. Forty-five per cent of people support a large increase in the amount of new housing in their local area and this rises to 57 per cent among Labour voters. But as all councillors know, our current planning system ignores the voters who want these new homes. Instead, it empowers a tiny number of opponents who say “not in my back yard”. This group of individuals, known as ‘nimbys’, prevent houses being built even when it is in the community interest.

Our current land use regulations systematically amplify the power of entrenched interests and privileged homeowners. And as Sue Morton of the Royal Town Planning Institute tells us, the majority of those who engage in discussions around planning are aged over 55. For typical pre-planning consultations, only around 3 per cent of those directly made aware of the process respond. In local plan consultations, response rates fall to

less than 1 per cent. This is not acceptable.

This lack of housing holds our economy back, as workers are priced out of areas and cannot afford to live close to better paying jobs. Empowering our communities and giving them real say and input over how their neighbourhoods change requires us rebalancing power toward those in housing need.

We have seen good examples of where community housing schemes work well, all thanks to Labour ideas. Since July 2018, mayor of London Sadiq Khan and now deputy mayor for housing Tom Copley have pushed for change; anyone seeking mayoral funding for estate regeneration involving the demolition of social homes must now show that residents have supported their proposals through a ballot initiative. Residents of Newham council’s 23-acre Carpenters Estate gave a 73 per cent yes vote on a two-thirds turnout to a people-powered plan for 2,000 new homes, of which 50 per cent are to be at social rent levels.

The Aberfeldy Estate in Tower Hamlets is another example. A ballot was conducted on a turnout of 91 per cent, with 93 per cent of residents voting in favour of new homes for their neighbourhood. When residents did protest, it was about the regeneration not happening fast enough. Banners adorned Jura House calling for more green spaces, better shops, new homes, new parks, safer streets and

subways, and most notable of all “why are we waiting?” and “pull us down now”. Unmesh Desai, London Assembly member for City and East, praised the efforts of the developer and housing association to understand residents’ views. When we ask more people what they think, we get more positive outcomes.

Labour can, does, and should listen to communities to ensure they drive the design, implementation and protection of policies that affect their local neighbourhood. Ensuring minimum participation requirements would ensure real local democracy and empowerment of the whole community. The system must be different from the current endless rounds of ‘consultations’ that do not necessarily include the whole community and in which anti-housing activists are all too often overrepresented.

We must recognise that representative local government exists to solve problems for the community. Most people do not want to participate in politics beyond the ballot box. Not getting on with what voters want leaves a void for organised opponents with the time and money to dominate the debate, while those who are likely to benefit most from change cannot be heard and are effectively ignored.

A community-powered approach to housing that says yes to more housing near jobs and public transport, that removes barriers to mixed-use residential and commercial development, and gives the community transparency over a simpler development process would be a good route for Labour. Ultimately, such a vision would help us tackle the housing crisis through both political and community-led means.

Chris Worrall is chair of the Fabian Society’s local government and housing member policy group and a member of the Labour Housing Group executive committee

What works

Labour can draw on its past successes in government and utilise community power to regenerate our 'left behind' neighbourhoods, writes *Diana Johnson MP*



The recent levelling up White Paper noted that between 1975 and 2021 roughly one new scheme or body was introduced each year to improve local and regional growth. Numerous policy initiatives have not only created a confusing funding landscape for deprived communities, but the majority have failed to tackle neighbourhood decline. It continues to blight communities.

Research by the Local Trust and OCSI has identified 225 'left behind' neighbourhoods. The majority of these areas are in the North or Midlands, with some in the South – often coastal towns.

Whether they are inner city, urban, suburban or more rural, they are defined by having local economies weakened by the decline of former industries, the growth of low-paid jobs, reliance on social security and, increasingly, charity.

Poverty, loneliness and isolation are part of a vicious circle for residents in neighbourhoods that suffer high levels of crime and anti-social behaviour

These neighbourhoods often have large social housing estates, frequently isolated from town or city centres – for example, Bransholme and Orchard Park in my Hull North constituency. Raising educational attainment is challenging and too many young people end up not in education, employment or training – the 'NEETs'. As Lisa Nandy has pointed out in this report, too many of the brightest local youngsters feel the need to move elsewhere to get on in life.

Recent years have seen these areas steadily losing shops, banks, pubs, youth clubs, churches, police stations, post offices, and access to GPs and NHS dentists. Meanwhile they have tended to gain food banks, gambling outlets, junk food sellers and loan sharks.

This has left the 10 per cent most deprived communities in Britain with disengaged communities that lack the social infrastructure of places and spaces to meet.

This reduction in physical space for in-person social interaction is a major contributor to neighbourhood decline, with levels of connectedness in communities being considerably lower where social fabric is low or non-existent. Poverty, loneliness and isolation are part of a vicious circle for residents in neighbourhoods that suffer high levels of crime and anti-social behaviour.

These are also mostly areas that have seen the deepest funding cuts since 2010, often hitting sports, arts and leisure amenities that also provided social spaces. These areas did not see the large-scale, sustained public and private sector investment in physical infrastructure and economic transformation, such as that seen, for example, in London Docklands over the past 40 years.

Recent government announcements such as the levelling up White Paper and the integrated rail plan will do little to change this.



Residents of neighbourhoods experiencing high deprivation and low levels of social infrastructure are also likely to suffer from worse socio-economic outcomes. A report by the all-party parliamentary group for 'left behind' neighbourhoods, which I co-chair, found that left behind areas have amongst the worst health outcomes in England. Their residents live shorter lives and experience debilitating ill-health earlier, including mental ill-health.

In recent years, a growing consensus has emerged that reversing neighbourhood decline requires strengthened social infrastructure. A strong social foundation is necessary to galvanise their wealth of local knowledge and capabilities – community power – to overcome challenges and to prosper.

Policies introduced by the last Labour government, such as the New Deal for Communities, are a powerful example of why community power, rather than a top-down Whitehall-driven preoccupation with political structures, is essential for successful regeneration. These policies remain the most impactful of the past 50 years and highlight how a modern vision for Labour can build a healthier and more prosperous future for our most deprived 'left behind' communities.

Regeneration policy under Labour: an overview

Vowing to learn from past mistakes, Labour from 1997 challenged previous approaches to neighbourhood regeneration.

Housing regeneration policies focused solely on buildings were changed to put community members at the core, involving them and seeking the guidance and counsel of community leaders.

The success of this community-focused approach remains evident today. It can be seen in places such as the health and community hub Bromley by Bow Centre and the housing association Poplar HARCA in Tower Hamlets, where community-led social housing regeneration – itself never 'one size fits all' or top down – joined up with other grassroots work on early years, jobs training and nurturing social entrepreneurs.

In Hull, the Goodwin Development Trust has been among our most successful community-led projects, starting in 1994 when 14 residents from the Thornton Estate got together to tackle the problems that plagued their community. It now has a 260-strong workforce and a £12m turnover.

Labour challenged how neighbourhood decline had been tackled in the decades before with innovation.

In Hull, Labour councillors pioneered fresh thinking on school meals, but it was 16 years later when Marcus Rashford again raised the importance of nutrition for pupils. Hull's pioneering policies contributed to the national school nutrition pilots in the last year of the Labour government when I was a minister responsible for school food.

Labour was pragmatic in learning from previous regeneration efforts too. Central to its vision was the process of gathering data. The Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) focused on this, and was essential for identifying the issues at hand in deprived neighbourhoods and how they could be solved.

There was also significant and committed funding for deprived neighbourhoods. A variety of different pots of funding was made available, with the largest one being the neighbourhood renewal fund. Additional funding tackling the numerous issues faced by deprived neighbourhoods – from housing to food poverty – was made available. Examples include Sure Start, Decent Homes, Housing Market Renewal, Excellence in Cities and the New Deal for Communities.

The most important feature, however, was handing communities real power as a central part of a long-term strategy to tackle neighbourhood decline.

Leveraging the power of communities to tackle neighbourhood decline

Essential to the success of the New Deal for Communities was its community-based approach: central government worked with local partnerships in deprived areas, promoting and sustaining community involvement.

The Labour government set up 18 policy action teams tasked with identifying the issues faced by deprived neighbourhoods. This taskforce, through its involvement of local community members was a stark contrast to previous initiatives launched





by governments and an example of how early on the need to involve local people was recognised under Labour. In setting out three clear, people-focused outcomes relating to health, education and employment, Labour's New Deal for Communities stood out from earlier government initiatives.

SEU reports from 1998 and 2000 highlighted the lack of investment in people, communities and social capital as part of the reason why previous regeneration efforts had failed. Labour responded to these findings by offering explicit funding for local capacity-building in deprived communities, for instance with the community empowerment fund set up in 2001. This provided deprived neighbourhoods with £35m over the following three years to support community and voluntary sector involvement in local strategic partnerships.

The impact was significant. With funding totalling more than £1.7bn, the New Deal for Communities was an ambitious programme that saw levels of deprivation fall in 77 per cent of all participating areas between 2004 and 2019, as research from Onward shows.

What does this mean for a future Labour government?

Labour in government had a vision for neighbourhood regeneration that had community power at its heart – the enabling state at the grassroots.

Twelve years after Labour left office – and despite post-2010 coalition austerity that hit the most deprived communities the hardest – the regeneration policies introduced by that Labour government continue to stand out as a successful example of how deprived neighbourhoods can start to transform.

The evidence for leveraging community power to address societal challenges has only grown in more recent years. From strengthening the health, wellbeing and resilience of individuals and communities, to building community cohesion in frayed societies, the benefits of involving communities in local decision-making are clear.

Labour recognises that empowered communities thrive. At the heart of Labour's regenerative policy approach must therefore be a long-term commitment to rebuilding social infrastructure in the communities where it is lacking. This takes time and requires long-term com-

mitment, but it is the key to communities developing confidence in their knowledge and capabilities – local people assuming control of their destiny.

The levelling up White Paper has cherry-picked some of these policies pioneered by Labour for tackling neighbourhood decline. One example is the proposal for a community wealth fund, a long-term and community-led endowment aimed at financing social infrastructure in England's most 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

Labour recognises that empowered communities thrive

The all-party parliamentary group for 'left behind' neighbourhoods has been campaigning for dormant assets to be used to establish a community wealth fund and the government has now agreed to consult on doing this. However, genuine 'levelling up' that would boost economic growth requires so much more.

Labour needs to set out how money and power should be placed into the hands of local people to strengthen the social fabric of left behind neighbourhoods across the country.

Championing social justice for the most deprived communities was in Labour's DNA long before the 1997 Blair government. Anyone who studies the records of George Lansbury or Clement Attlee will know this.

While adapting to present-day conditions, Labour must now learn from and build upon the successes of our heritage and support communities in taking control to build their own future.

Diana Johnson is the Labour MP for Hull North and co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for 'left behind' neighbourhoods

Time to act

Community action and local people are as vital to tackling the climate crisis as national policies and large-scale investments, writes *Miatta Fahnbulleh*



The imperative to tackle climate change grows with urgency each day. The science is clear: we must halve carbon emissions in the next 10 years to limit temperature rises to 1.5°C. But this is a global average and will require much steeper emissions reductions in industrialised countries than in developing countries.

At the same time, we have been warned that nature more broadly is declining globally at rates ‘unprecedented in human history,’ according to the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services.

The more environmental breakdown remains unchecked, the more chaos in the system: more devastating hurricanes, record droughts, extreme floods, the coastline disappearing, food scarcity from loss of crop-yield and fisheries – all driving climate-related poverty across the world at a scale we can’t even imagine. The cost of this not just in pounds but in human suffering is unimaginable.

The choice before us is whether we take deliberate action now to achieve the change we need, or we sleepwalk into a crisis and respond with panic when it is already too late.

If we choose to act now – which we must – the scale of the response to meet this challenge will be immense. It will require national investment and policy innovation akin to those we have seen

The choice before us is whether we take deliberate action now to achieve the change we need, or we sleepwalk into a crisis and respond with panic when it is already too late

in response to the pandemic. This will include large-scale investment in green infrastructure and technology; investment in the social capital and social infrastructure required to manage the transition in a way that is just; legally binding targets and regulation; and green taxes and incentives to bend markets that have been slow to respond to the climate imperative.

But to deliver the pace and scale of change required, this must be matched by equally ambitious action at the local level.

We cannot transition to net zero in a way that is just without empowering and equipping those at the local level to respond. If we simply yank levers at the national level and hope for the best, we may hit our decarbonisation targets, but we are unlikely to do so in a way that protects and supports the communities that will be impacted by this transition. To achieve this, we must get three things right.

First, the green transition must focus resources, political attention and support



on places. Not only does this mean implementing bold, industrial transformation plans for places, but it also requires putting local people who understand the needs of their local economy and community in the driving seat.

The transition to net zero must come hand in glove with a radical devolution of power and resources. Devolution of green taxes and property taxes could be combined with devolved funding and new powers over education, skills, employment support, energy, housing, planning and local transport.

And in return for these powers, local leaders must work closely with their community to define what success looks like, develop a shared just transition plan for their areas and create new ways of doing things, tapping into the energy and ideas bubbling up from the ground. This will give local people agency over what 'good' looks like as we transition, and a direct say in how the local economy should be made to work in their interest.

Second, the green transition will require large-scale public investment to transform places and revive communities that have been held back. We know that there is no path to net zero without public investment. The question is whether we do this as part of a deliberate and proactive strategy to adapt our economy as we decarbonise, or do this in a panic as the impacts of climate change begin to bite.

If we are going to have to invest for net zero, why not plough this into our communities now to create jobs, boost industries and remake places. Why not start with a £50bn fund devolved to places to support investment in the green transition over the next five years? This would create a much-needed stimulus to local economies and enable places to build the physical and social infrastructure they need to revive their economies as they rapidly decarbonise. And 5 per cent of this devolved funding should be used to create a Community



Wealth Fund that would be pushed down to neighbourhoods to allow community groups to come together and design local schemes to improve their environment and the community in which they live.

Third, the green economy that emerges must be owned by communities and work in their interest. Community ownership of green infrastructure and assets, employee ownership, mutuals and co-operatives will give people a bigger stake and ownership of their local economy so that more of the benefits flow to them.

And there is a powerful role that municipal authorities can play working with anchor institutions across their area – such as universities, colleges, housing associations, NHS health boards, or large private sector employers – to bring this social economy about. By mobilising and co-ordinating local spending and investment power, these institutions can create jobs and build local supply chains. Not only this, they can also buy up community assets that would otherwise disappear and pump prime co-operatives, social enterprise and community businesses that are owned by and rooted in their community.

There are inspiring examples across the country that show us what this could look like. This includes Hackney Energy, the first community-owned social housing solar project on Banister House estate. The project is run as a co-operative with four local directors from the estate. The instal-

lation gave paid employment and work experience to 30 local young people. Local people can buy shares in the project, with a discounted rate for estate residents. Shareholders have a say in how the project is run and receive around 4 per cent interest on their investment a year. Other profits are put into the Banister House Community Fund for fuel poverty initiatives and youth activities on the estate.

And then there is Riverford, an award-winning company delivering around 47,000 organic food boxes a week to homes around the UK from its regional farms. Seventy-four per cent of the company is now owned by an employee trust, benefitting all of Riverford's 650 employees equally. And its founder, Guy Singh-Watson, retains a 26 per cent share of the business, which he can only sell to the trust.

There are thousands of other examples across the country of people in communities coming together to reimagine how things could be done and to build a green economy that works in their interest.

The transition to net zero will require change in every aspect of our lives. But herein lies a golden opportunity to fix so much that is broken with our current system. Get this right, and we have a chance to transform our economy, revive places and breathe life back into our communities.

Miatta Fahnbulleh is chief executive of the New Economics Foundation and a trustee of Local Trust

Healing the cuts

If we are to tackle inequality, we must put power in the hands of the communities which are most affected, writes *Taiwo Owatemi MP*



Community power can act as a powerful tool to tackle inequality, discrimination and disadvantage at the local level. However, far too often well-intentioned grassroots efforts get bogged down in pre-existing power structures and a lack of access to the necessary technical knowledge.

If community power is to help promote a more inclusive society, we must be aware of the conditions which create inequality and discrimination in the first place – paying particular attention to how certain groups face multiple disadvantages. And we must resist replicating oppressive power structures and dominating decision-making processes, instead ensuring community voices are the ones driving change.

Community power can help tackle structural inequality

Communities across Britain are suffering from poor health outcomes, living in unsafe communities with a lack of educational and employment opportunities and insecure access to housing and food.

These poor health outcomes do not affect people equally: recently released national figures attest to the reality that race, sex and other factors play a profound role, with the NHS Race and Health Observatory identifying ‘overwhelming’ ethnic minority health inequalities. The Labour party recognises this reality, and, among other measures, would introduce a national Race Equality Act to tackle these structural inequalities at their source.

In my constituency of Coventry North West, nowhere are inequalities more glaring than when it comes to violent crime. Over the last decade, knife crime and violent crime more broadly have risen steeply, not just in Coventry but across the country. As a result, more young people, especially young people from disadvantaged communities, are at risk and suffer from the persistent fear of violent crime.

A community-powered approach can help to mitigate issues such as violent crime, but it is first important to understand the conditions which foster it. And we do not need to look much further than the Conservatives’ austerity agenda which has fuelled discrimination and exclusion across the country.

Successive Conservative governments have made severe cuts to police forces across Britain, slashing policing numbers by almost 15 per cent according to CAGE Research Centre. In my constituency, the local police force works very hard to combat knife crime but there are simply too few officers to be able to respond with the necessary follow-up to root it out.

Austerity measures did not just target the police but other valuable public services as well: there are fewer social workers and fewer youth centres in our towns and cities.

If community power is to help promote a more inclusive society, we must be aware of the conditions which create inequality and discrimination in the first place – paying particular attention to how certain groups face multiple disadvantages



Removing measures that divert young people from crime has allowed it to balloon. But violent crime is also perpetuated by systemic inequalities in our society; one of the most glaring examples of this is that young people who are excluded from school are more likely to be drawn into crime.

If Labour is to tackle violent crime, we need to remove the obstacles that are stopping people from living safe and fulfilled lives – and we need to put community power to work to help. I am proud that local efforts in my city of Coventry are doing exactly that.

People in my constituency are taking a public health approach to help solve knife crime. This means viewing the issue in all of its complexity and intersectionality. Like any other public health issue, knife crime affects different groups unequally. This is true with respect to race, sex, and socio-economic status.

In my constituency, youth clubs like FRI-DAYS are stepping in to provide support to young people so that they do not feel the need to resort to crime. The founder, who was a teenager himself when he created the business, organises events for young people to find social support and hobbies and to help them develop important educational and job-readiness skills. Also in Coventry is Daniel Baird's Bleed Foundation, which has stepped in to provide bleed kits to communities to help reduce fatalities when knife crime does occur.

These are just two examples of how community action can help tackle the systemic, underlying causes of knife crime whilst also filling more urgent resourcing gaps.

Across the country there are many more examples of local action being taken to promote inclusion and tackle discrimination. It is crucial for politicians to empower that effort by using our knowledge of parliamentary procedure to ensure the right policies are in place. But we must also utilise the knowledge which comes out of grassroots efforts to inform those policies

and make sure we never take a top-down approach.

The answer to the most challenging crises of our time, like knife crime, is for the government to draw upon the expertise of community-led solutions and embrace the comprehensive way that grassroots organisations focus on the particulars of that problem in their communities.

And importantly, communities like mine keep equality at the heart of their efforts. Politicians at the highest levels of government should take their cues from such work.

Politicians must do more to let communities take the lead

In watching local groups take action to tackle the causes and effects of violent crime in Coventry, I have seen how their efforts are led by community voices and experiences. As a member of parliament, I can amplify those voices and would encourage all politicians to do the same.

The main business of politicians must always be to listen to the people they represent, so that they can better draw attention to the work those people are doing and the problems they are facing. This sounds like common sense, but it is often embarrassingly far from the norm.

It is crucial to reach out to people on their own terms so they feel more empowered to speak out on the issues that are important to them

Engaging with our communities does not just mean sending out campaign leaflets a week before election day or assuming constituents will knock on your constituency office door. It is crucial to reach out to people on their own terms so they feel more empowered to speak out on the issues that are important to them.

Fostering community power is essential to equality and social justice

Community voices are loudest when members trust that they will actually be heard. A simple way to build that trust is by meeting communities on their own turf, on their own terms, and to discuss the issues they care about.

There is success in community power

We can create effective policy to combat exclusion and discrimination through the insight from local people. This is why Labour's commitment to producing a Race Equality Act must and will be rooted in knowledge coming from our communities.

By meeting with one another to discuss the root causes of inequality, reaching out to people with the necessary technical knowhow on how to combat violent crime, and keeping the pressure up in the forums where decisions on these issues are being made, members of my community have successfully wielded their collective voices to make Coventry a safer city to live in. I have seen groups of parents, neighbours and young activists in my constituency become formidable voices of opposition and deliver change for local people. It shows that community power can succeed when it holds traditional power structures to account.

Fostering community power is essential to equality and social justice. Change does not happen in a vacuum and social justice does not exist in a policy paper alone. Without the grassroots efforts taking place each day in communities, we will not see the progress towards equality and social justice we are aiming for.

Taiwo Owatemi is the Labour MP for Coventry North West and shadow minister for women and equalities

Stronger connections

Empty slogans will do nothing to fix the division and disconnection in British society. Instead, we need a new kind of politics which puts community power at its heart. *Kim Leadbeater MP* explains



Britain has been through a lot in recent years. The pandemic has inflicted huge damage on the country, our communities, families and individuals. Too many have lost loved ones and countless others, including some of my friends and family, have been sick or are still coping with the effects of long Covid. It is important to remember, though, that the pandemic only added to challenges the country was already facing, including more disconnected communities and a growing epidemic of loneliness. A decade of austerity increased the pressures on many people. And many of the divisions created by political upheavals, including the Brexit referendum, are still with us.

Batley and Spen, where I was born and brought up and which I now represent in parliament, has been through a lot too. After the murder of my sister, Jo Cox, in 2016, people came together in all kinds of amazing ways, but sadly during the by-election campaign last year, outsiders came in to try to divide our community again.

I have learned that whatever the challenges, the power of community can get us through and help us recover. The Jo Cox Foundation and the volunteers at More in Common Batley and Spen, for example, continue my sister's legacy and work to heal – not widen – divides. Across the country, when the pandemic struck, it was ordinary people in their communities

who were the first line of defence against the virus, looking after their neighbours and supporting the places where they live.

These acts of community power, however big or small, all help build a country we can be proud of. One where people can see, feel, and make change locally, where there are the spaces and places to meet others from different backgrounds. In my view, this activity at the local level helps underpin national cohesion.

A disconnected, divided, unequal country

Strong, diverse and well-connected community networks spread opportunity and promote social mobility. They increase wellbeing and impact physical health. Studies show, for example, that lower levels of social connection can result in higher rates of cardiovascular disease. And strong



communities protect us against the 'us versus them' narratives that can foster prejudice, isolate people and lead to loneliness.

This is why it is so regrettable that even before the shocks of recent years, so many things that held society together were starting to disappear. Nearly 30,000 pubs have closed since the 1970s. Libraries, community spaces and youth centres have disappeared in alarming numbers. On average 4,000 publicly-owned spaces are sold off every year.

This depletes what we call 'social capital': the connections between people and the feelings of trust that these networks help to generate.

A disconnected, divided society inevitably threatens the cohesion of the nation. And it leads to a growing chasm between the places where people live and Westminster, where so many decisions that affect those same places are taken.

In my by-election in Batley and Spen last year, turnout was 47.5 per cent. I was told that compared to similar contests this was pretty good, but that is still over half of the constituency not voting. That would not happen if people really felt that the system was working for them and that they had a stake in it.

A recent study for the international More in Common organisation found that fewer than one in 10 people in Britain think that the government is making life better in their community. It is hard for a society to be more cohesive when people feel it does not work for them and that they do not have a stake in it.

Levelling up?

The government says that 'levelling up' the country will not only be good economically, but will also contribute to social cohesion. It sounds good, but unsurprisingly most people are confused about what levelling up actually means.

It also does not help to build trust in the system when ministers cherry-pick

high-profile projects that are often not in the areas of greatest need. Worse still, these funding pots are centrally controlled from Whitehall with decisions continuing to be made by officials behind closed doors, far away from the people affected by them. Communities have little or no say in what happens to them. By contrast, research from the think tank Onward and the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research suggests that the most successful regeneration projects have had community-led elements to them.

According to the More in Common study, people think decisions about their community should be taken locally. They want to see their parks and green spaces improved, revamped high streets and a sense of purpose restored to their community. And crucially, society is undermined if crime is not tackled and young people lack opportunities.

I am proud to be from Batley and Spen. Each town and village has its own identity but the problems they face are similar, as they are in much of the country. Pride of place is what drives me to want to make this area even better. If levelling up is a lottery or a competition judged in Whitehall it will not make enough of a difference to our communities. For levelling up to mean something tangible, communities must be in the driving seat.

The moment for community power

If we really want to level up, and we do, then it is time for community-powered politics to take hold. In the short term, Labour should be arguing that more money from levelling up funds goes into the hands of community-led partnerships. One way would be for 25 per cent of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to go towards the development of social infrastructure at the neighbourhood level.

The Community Ownership Fund could also be adapted to make it easier for more disadvantaged communities to benefit.

For levelling up to mean something tangible, communities must be in the driving seat



The aim of all this is to have more community-owned spaces that can bring people together.

In the long term, we need to put community power at the heart of our vision for the country so that people feel they are in control, connected to others and contributing to a national sense of togetherness. This could come through a new Community Power Act.

I am a strong believer in convening all those with the ideas and the resources to make change happen. So, wherever possible, community partnerships, involving local authorities, businesses, and local people should be in the driving seat. Communities should have the power to take control of vacant spaces on their high streets to restore civic pride. Community businesses, as advocated by Power to Change and others, could occupy properties that otherwise lay empty for years.

A society that faces challenges such as ours, that can feel as divided and disconnected as ours, and is as unequal as ours, is one that cannot prosper as it should. Empty slogans are not the answer, but a new community-powered politics could be. One that enables communities to exercise their power, restores pride in places we all share, brings people together and helps revive faith in our political system. If we can unleash community power, we can start to rebuild the country from the bottom up and use that power to transform our communities and make Britain a better connected, more productive and happier place to live.

Kim Leadbeater is the Labour MP for Batley and Spen. She is co-chair of the APPG on loneliness and connecting communities. Before her election she was ambassador for the Jo Cox Foundation and chair of More in Common Batley and Spen

Deciding factors

Labour's next manifesto needs to offer communities more decision-making powers. Poverty truth commissions, citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting are a great place to start, writes *Jessie Joe Jacobs*



“Voters in Red Wall areas want more power over more money,” read the headline of a report by Demos last year on putting the public at the heart of levelling up. It caught my attention – but it did not surprise me.

The research found that nearly eight in 10 members of the public thought that local people should be involved in decisions about how government money is used in their local area. This preference was so strong that the public thought local control was more important than the actual amount of funding. This was particularly the case in the former Red Wall areas.

For too long in the UK there has been a deep power inequality and a marked deficit of people's participation and voice in shaping the decisions around them. This is particularly so for many of our traditional working-class communities.

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Being left behind is not just about the empty boarded-up shops and high unemployment numbers in too many of our communities. It is found in a belief that the world has stopped listening. It is about people feeling like they have no voice and no power. This is one reason why the core message of the Brexit campaign – ‘take back control’ – resonated so strongly in these areas; there is a longing and deep need for more power and influence. Brexit has done nothing to address this, but a clear offer from a Labour government could.

Labour has got a job to do if it is to win back people in these former Red Wall areas. As we deliver for them economically, we must deliver for them in terms of pride of place and giving them control over their own lives. It is time to pioneer, champion and identify real, tangible ways for how power in the UK can be better shared and how our democracy can be improved.

As the coordinator of the recently formed Democracy Network, hosted by Involve and funded by Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, I have seen example upon example of inspiring activities and initiatives all across the UK which are addressing issues of power and voice. In turn, they are improving outcomes for local people and giving glimpses of what the future of democracy at a local and national level could look like.



Community projects like the poverty truth commission model, which argues that those experiencing poverty must be involved in the decisions that affect them, are making an impact across the UK.

The statistics on poverty are frightening. The Social Metrics Commission recently reported that 4.5 million people are experiencing deep levels of poverty in the UK, with those on the lowest incomes hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic. And there are 1.7 million more people in ‘deep poverty’ compared to 20 years ago, living on less than half of what they need to stay above the poverty line.

But poverty truth commissions are helping to bring about change for individuals, organisations and at a policy level. They are helping to alter the ways people think about poverty by involving those with lived experience in decision-making.

In West Cheshire, one social housing provider involved in a poverty truth commission reported a 75 per cent reduction in evictions after it changed its approach to managing tenancies. Learning from the poverty truth work, the organisation moved from a punitive approach to offering a wellbeing service which focuses on early intervention and supporting people to sustain tenancies.

Lived experience experts have consistently noted the benefits of this initiative

too. For some experiencing poverty, it has meant increased confidence or getting a job. For others, it has been about friendship, motivation, fresh ways of understanding difficult problems and more motivation.

In Speke, Merseyside, communities took part in a participatory budget process to tackle issues of serious organised crime. Again, it made a big impact.

Serious and organised crime had been dominating the headlines again in Liverpool, with illegal drug markets, sexual exploitation, violence, and knife and gun crime also appearing to be on the rise. The usual response from policing was increased enforcement activities and other reactive measures.

But Speke took a different approach. It was one of five sites the Home Office supported to explore how community-owned solutions created through equal contribution, well-facilitated dialogue, and empowered communities might address these major issues.

A project led by Mutual Gain, called 'Speke up', saw 300 local people attend an event to listen to 29 groups pitch for a share of funding. The attendees at the event were able to vote for and decide where that money went and who got the funding.

This has now led to 31 new community projects being developed. At the conclusion of the event, the local neighbourhood inspector said that his career has been defined by few key events, and the Speke Up programme was in his top three. Other participants commented that this experience led to real community empowerment.

Labour leaders are also demonstrating how they can use existing structures, such as combined authorities, to give the public more of a say in shaping their communities.

Greater Manchester Combined Authority established a youth combined authority in 2018 that brings together 42 young people from across the city region to discuss, develop and provide constructive challenge on the issues that matter to them. Already the group has played a key role in the development of Our Pass, which provides 16 to 18-year-olds with free

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bus travel, and ensured its voice is heard on proposals to introduce police school engagement officers.

Another great example is the citizens' assembly on climate change ran by North of Tyne Combined Authority and Shared Future, which saw 50 citizens in the region come together to discuss how the region can combat climate change.

The Greater London Authority also set up a citizenship and integration initiative which has run projects such as London voter registration week and London Voices, a research project to understand what is needed to ensure equal, inclusive, representative civic and democratic participation.

People want to play a role in the decisions that affect their local area. We must move beyond thinking that politicians and political leaders have all the answers and instead begin to see a shift to more of the role of convenor – people who can bring effective public, private and community partnerships together and who can draw from the vast amount of expertise and knowledge around them in their communities to create solutions for the big issues we face.

We must ensure we make democracy and community power a key tenet in Labour's manifestos nationally but also regionally and locally.

Let's see more local authorities and combined authorities ensuring the voices of communities help drive the design, implementation and protection of policies and reforms that improve their everyday lives. Whether that is through citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting, poverty truth commissions or another of the many ideas and actions we can adopt – we just need to get on and do it.

Jessie Joe Jacobs is coordinator of the UK Democracy Network. She was the Labour candidate in the Tees Valley mayoral election in 2021



A job to do

Labour must take inspiration from its roots and offer bold policies to strengthen the economy in favour of workers and their communities, argues *Liam Byrne MP*



The best thing you can give someone in life is a chance. And that is why we had to invent the Labour party; the most powerful force for good in our history, a coalition of people determined to democratise chances, opportunity – and wealth.

It is Labour ideas that are essential for change in communities like mine in east Birmingham, the most income deprived community in the country where five generations of my family lived and worked. And in the absence of a Labour government, it is community-led change that is the key to progress.

In a sense, this is a return to our roots. In the new working-class communities of the industrial revolution, the Chartists, the Christian Reformers and the Cooperators sought throughout the 19th century to advance liberty by devising new means of self-government and cooperation. This led to cooperatives, trade unions and in time, political parties.

Groups like the Rochdale Pioneers created co-operatives devoted to “the moral and intellectual advancement of its members” to provide members with ‘groceries, butcher’s meat, drapery goods, clothes and clogs’. Many early Owenite societies and stores prefaced their rules with the line from Isaiah 41:6: “They helped every one his neighbour; and every one said to his brother, be of good courage.” Even the creation of the first

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limited liability and joint stock companies were an early attempt to provide a co-operative framework to enable people to work together. From this sprang the co-operative movement which has had such a positive impact across the globe.

This ethos – of community – runs like a golden thread through our tradition. Clement Attlee’s first book was, after all, called *The Social Worker*. Its central idea was simple: anyone who believes in society is a social worker. We work on building society.

Today, the same sense of community spirit is a fountainhead for Labour ideas designed to create economic opportunity. The starting point is life’s basics – food, energy and opportunity – to provide real workable solutions, to find a better way for us all to prosper in thriving communities that provide real hope for our young people and a greener, cleaner environment for us all. Our co-operative and community principles give us the foundation upon which to build.

Our belief in community gives us an ideology which can encourage and enthuse local areas. This, combined with the power of a Labour government, is what can allow us to make real progress.

Although Labour is not currently in

government, it controls many local councils and regional mayoralities, especially in key urban areas. And even where Labour is not in control, our common-sense belief in co-operation and commitment to local community wealth building provides arguments that can be used across the political divide. So how do we make progress? Here are 10 ideas to get us going:

1. Progressive leadership

We need local government which is fully signed up to co-operative and community values and principles. We have to change the way our economy and our society works and that means putting community wealth building at the heart of public policy. Without clear political commitment these principles will not get us to where we need to be.

2. Co-operative development

Labour local government should commit to trebling the number of co-operatives around their areas as a step towards delivering real change. These should be supported by specific policy units to embed co-operatives in all the work local Labour government does.

In particular, Labour should include co-operatives in any economic and inclusive growth strategies – and require all providers of business support programmes to include the co-operative option alongside other business models. In Greater Manchester for example, under the Labour mayor, there are plans to create designated ‘co-operative zones’ with dedicated resources to offer business advice and support for new and existing co-ops in the city-region. With the right leadership we can go as far as ‘community innovation districts’.

3. Community innovation districts

These districts could establish and scale co-operative models across services and assets using every lever at hand. This

could be through subsidy support and business rates discounts, to bring forward community buildings and to boost community-led development in a single space. Through these new community innovation districts, local leaders and activists could work together to build hotbeds of community wealth building in defined hubs in every region.

4. Harnessing the power of local institutions

Local government should use its full convening power to bring together major businesses, employers and community groups. Collectively their power to transform the way workers are treated, investments are made, and procurement decisions are taken will create shared value within at the centre of decision-making.

5. Progressive procurement

We need region-wide progressive procurement audits by consortiums of local authorities and other public service bodies. We should work with partners to ensure that local businesses are at the front of the procurement queue and community value is prioritised and promoted.

6. Local investment

A community fund should support groups with the seed funding they need to start on the road to real change. In particular, local government should provide support for co-operative friendly finance by underwriting democratically owned, local community banks and financial institutions as a route to capital investment. This is not a new idea. Local government in the late Victorian period was energised by the municipal bank movement.

7. Assets and services working for the whole community

Labour councillors, supported by their Labour MPs, MSPs and AMs, should lead a 'community first' mindset across their



region, putting community value at the front of decision-making, and convening co-operative groups and the wider community to develop plans. This will enable communities to build their own solutions to ensure everyone has what they need to live full and happy lives.

8. Food justice

This is an immediate priority – it is unbelievable that so many families are reliant on food banks, often provided by voluntary organisations. Labour local government can provide space, transport, communications, co-ordination, and seed funding to bring businesses and voluntary organisations together to scale up food justice for all.

9. Energy: a cleaner co-operative future

Labour councils can take the lead in ensuring local energy needs are met from renewable sources. Municipal energy projects can accelerate the use of renewable energy. We should work for a level playing field with the private sector which will demonstrate added value by keeping money in each local economy. Fuel poverty is often experienced by those in older, poorer housing. A major community-based retrofitting effort could bring down household costs and protect the environment. Locally-based co-operatives, controlled by local people, would ensure

a community-powered approach which offers people the support they need.

10. Community assets

So many of our high streets and local shopping centres are in decline, we can see it all around us. Yes, people are changing their shopping habits but too often these are part of a predictable spiral of decline: every shop, bank, pub, pharmacy, or cashpoint which closes, leads to less footfall for the neighbouring businesses. We should not just resign ourselves to these closures.

Labour councils should work to put a sense of vibrancy and excitement at the heart of our communities. Part of that answer could be community ownership of vacant premises. We should enable local communities to invest in and govern local places and give people a say in what local places can be used for.

We do not have to wait for the next election to start delivering progress. We can all take action today. We can contact our local council and councillors today and ask what they are doing to build community wealth in the local area. Ask how they are incentivising cooperative models, and how they weight towards them in their procurement processes – and if not, why not?

Liam Byrne is the Labour MP for Birmingham Hodge Hill

The catalyst for change

As evidence from Liverpool shows, we need local authorities and local people working together to design public policy, focusing on what is strong – not what is wrong – in the community. *Sue Jarvis* explains



As a former local government officer, I remember vividly the introduction of the Localism Act in 2011 which provided the backdrop for my work over the following years. The aim of the act was to facilitate the devolution of decision-making powers from central government control to individuals and communities.

In Knowsley, where I was director of policy, it ushered in a suite of local policies on social growth, community empowerment and community assets as the local authority and its strategic partners considered alternative service delivery models. At the macro level, the act also prompted a strategic governance review of arrangements relating to transport, economic development and regeneration which led to the creation of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority. This was followed by a progressive devolution of powers to the city region with the aim of driving local growth.

Fast forward to 2022 and the UK is more regionally divided than ever. There is wide variation within and between regions across a range of economic and social indicators, including GVA, earnings, educational attainment, and health. Similarly, measures of social capital and connectedness suggest wide spatial variations in the degree to which people feel they belong to their neighbourhood.

The long-awaited levelling up White Paper offers an opportunity to double down on devolution to drive prosperity and empower communities. The paper proposes 12 policy missions to reduce different forms of regional inequality including restoring a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where they have been lost.

Whilst devolution is no panacea, local decision-making has been shown to generate better local economic performance and more resilient places, as local policies are tailored to local needs.

Crucially, local government is in a unique position to drive the place agenda at a strategic level using its local knowledge, representative structures and strong partnerships with communities, businesses and other public agencies.

Engaging local communities: translating policy intent into tangible outcomes

To truly 'level up' and shape prosperity, the tools and resources for devolution must extend to local communities that have the best understanding of places. This will require a commitment from local government to seek alternative forms of involvement that go beyond traditional partnership working to engage with and empower local communities to shape policy.

A review of the evidence presented in 2017 to the Commission on the Future of Localism, which looked at the impact and achievements of localism, illustrates how difficult it can be to translate local policy intent into tangible outcomes for communities.

Despite numerous examples of communities coming together to address local concerns and influence public services through their collective ideas and local knowledge, the commission found too many instances where communities did not feel they were being treated as genuine partners, due to an imbalance in power between citizen and state. Shortcomings included top-down and paternalistic decision making, a lack of trust on behalf of public authorities and narrow participation on the part of local communities.

Asset-based community development, which emerged as an alternative strategy of community development in the 1990s and early 2000s, has been used to build more effective relationships with communities. In contrast to 'needs-based' frameworks, which have been criticised as top-down, paternalistic and often one-dimensional, this approach seeks to identify assets within communities and attempts to coordinate a development strategy around them.

As several academics have argued, this approach to community development, with its emphasis on strengths and assets, is more likely to inspire positive action than an exclusive focus on needs and problems. Research from professor Caroline Moser shows that this approach is particularly appropriate for deprived communities and neighbourhoods, where intangible assets such as community relationships and social capital may be more important to an area's wellbeing than physical assets such as housing.

In the UK, asset-based community development experienced a resurgence following widening disparities in economic and health outcomes after the 2008 global

financial crisis and subsequent major recession.

The influential Marmot Review of 2010 encouraged the development of asset-based approaches to develop healthy and sustainable communities as an alternative to more top-down approaches. And evidence from Coventry, a Marmot pilot city, found that asset-based approaches – along with a strong policy lead from the local authority – resulted in a narrowing of the life expectancy gap between the most affluent and most deprived communities, along with improved education, health and life satisfaction outcomes.

Lessons from Liverpool

For the past two years I have been working with Liverpool city council and its local partners to develop a portfolio of community-based participatory research, focused on community assets, social infrastructure and public service delivery.

A number of small, local pilots have been delivered under the banner ‘the City Conversation’ which foregrounds local knowledge and the capacities communities have for action. In adopting an asset-based approach to participation, the objective has been to ‘change the conversation’ and establish what is strong, not what is wrong, in communities.

Liverpool city council is currently delivering change through its ‘city plan’, which provides a shared long-term vision and commitment from the city’s anchor institutions to tackle inequalities. The plan recognises both the complexity of problems experienced by residents and the necessity of devising a radical approach to co-producing future public services. At the centre of the policy is a commitment to collaboration with residents; creating structures for collective action to utilise assets and capacity at all levels.

In this context the local authority is acting as a catalyst for practical community empowerment.

The City Conversation recruited 17 people from across the council into a central team to work with communities and identify common themes. They mapped assets and made connections with ward councillors, housing providers, community leaders and individuals who shared their knowledge about local activities. They visited groups to find out what people thought about where they lived and how residents and the council could work together to improve it. Those involved also visited events in community hubs (churches, libraries, children’s centres) and knocked on doors.

What they learnt from communities is that people across the city have a real sense of pride in their area and want it to flourish. They are enthusiastic to make a difference in their community, but often do not know how to get started. As the experts in their community, residents want a voice, and many people welcomed the opportunity to talk to the council.

The City Conversation in Clubmoor applied a community-based participatory research methodology to strengthen dialogue and engagement of public and community partners in developing policy and services. Resident engagement and data collection was undertaken by community researchers: individuals from the community, frontline public agencies and local charities were trained in basic qualitative research methods. This has not only created a cadre of skilled individuals that can be involved in future community-led research activity, but has established community-led research as a practical tool for public agencies to use.

This case study from Liverpool demonstrates the value of taking an asset-based community development approach to gather evidence and insights on the things that matter to local people to inform place-sensitive policymaking. And both projects prove the value of knowledge co-production and the important contribution that local perspectives bring to the design and articulation of public policy.

Local government is in a unique position to drive the place agenda at a strategic level using its local knowledge, representative structures and strong partnerships

Very often individuals and communities have the answers to the challenges they face, but need policymakers to support them to achieve change, rather than do what public agencies think is ‘best’. Clearly, the direct involvement of targeted communities in the development and delivery of research not only brings greater depth of engagement to design more effective public policy, but can also accelerate the translation of research outcomes into action.

If local pride is central to the government’s levelling up ambitions, then we need to ensure practical participation using tailored strategies at the local level. This is how we enable local authorities and communities to collectively deliver change for their area.

Whilst a more empowered local government and local community are more likely to deliver better place-based outcomes, there remains more work to be done to ensure local authorities have the tools and resources to make this a reality beyond pockets of best practice. The hope is that the levelling up White Paper provides a catalyst to do this.

Sue Jarvis is co-director of the Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place at the University of Liverpool. She was previously director of policy and partnerships at Knowsley Council



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