



Summary notes: Local Government Association Conference fringe meeting

How can community-led approaches build thriving neighbourhoods?

Tuesday 22nd October 2024

4.30pm-6.00pm

Piccolino, Harrogate

About 3ni

The national network for neighbourhood improvement (3ni) is a new unique community of practice for local and combined authority officers, dedicated to partnership working, and community-led, place-based regeneration.

The network builds on the learnings from local government pioneers, evidence from past regeneration programmes, and the recent experience of the Big Local programme.

The network's agenda is developed in partnership with its members, to ensure it responds to and meets the need of local government.

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a national charity set up in 2012 to deliver Big Local, a unique programme that puts residents in neighbourhoods across England in control of decisions about their own lives and areas.

We aim to demonstrate the value of long term, patient, resident-led funding, and bring about a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and other agencies engage with communities and their neighbourhoods.

Big Local is a Lottery-funded programme which committed £1m each to 150 neighbourhoods across England. Each area has 10 - 15 years to spend the funds it has been

About New Local

New Local (formerly the New Local Government Network) is an independent think tank and network of councils, with a mission to transform public services and unlock community power.

We look for new, community-based solutions to some of our society's biggest challenges - and team up with innovative people from across all parts of government and communities to achieve change.

At the heart of all our work is the belief in community power - the idea that people should have more say over the places they live and the services they use.



Chair:

Jessica Studdert, Interim Chief Executive, New Local

Speakers:

Cllr Jane Ashworth OBE, Leader, Stoke-on-Trent City Council

Patrick Melia OBE, Chief Executive, Sunderland City Council

Anna Francis, Co-director, Portland Inn Project

Matt Leach, Chief Executive, Local Trust

About the session

Our neighbourhoods are dealing with the fallout of big national challenges - the cost-of-living crisis, pressures on public services and a flagging economy. Effective responses require highly adaptive approaches - even neighbourhoods that are next to each other might have widely varying outcomes.

This session explored the ways in which councils can effectively support community capacity, particularly in areas experiencing low levels of social capital. This capacity building allows communities to take a lead on neighbourhood renewal and work in ways that address the specific needs of their individual neighbourhoods.

The need for community cohesion

The current changes in the political landscape bring potential opportunities, but meanwhile there has been a dislocation between community and council. After the riots that took place across the country this summer, there is a need to make sure everyone feels socially included, and there is no one size fits all solution to do this.

Speakers reflected on how they have experienced this locally. For example, Stoke-on-Trent is facing unprecedented demand for social services support, with 1/50 children in care and 1/20 known to social services. Levels of mistrust in the council are higher than they have ever been, partly because of this. A lot of community work often begins with children, summer holiday groups, early years support and so on - therefore, it is hard to get community groups up and running. These issues, alongside growing deprivation, are allowing levels of disenfranchisement to grow and create a space for politically divisive groups to thrive.

In the context of a new government and competing ideas on the role of the state, it is perhaps time to reflect approaches that have been recommended in the past, such as the preventative state, the

relational state and the economic growth minded state - all three of which underline the need for social capital.

In terms of a preventative approach, communities living in deprived areas which lack social infrastructure tend to have higher levels of most major health problems, and issues of crime. People in these areas want to feel that they are a part of something, this is an issue for government to address, but in reality, the solution must come from communities themselves. If we are to instead take an economic growth focused approach, wealth comes from inclusion and opportunity which we can foster by developing our community groups and civic assets ensuring people feel they can develop their communities and rebuild their local economies

Community leadership and asset-transfers

Community asset transfers give the opportunity for those with the knowledge, capacity, and experience in the community to take charge of something and create a space tailored to community need. For example, Fulwell Library in Sunderland, which is currently being run by three retired local teachers, and the Portland Inn Project in Stoke-on-Trent.

[Portland Inn Project \(PIP\)](#) is a community-based arts organisation in Stoke-on-Trent. It is shaped by community decision making and has worked in collaboration with residents to challenge negative stigma and stereotypes about the area. During the time when PIP was first being created, stories in the media painted a negative picture of the area, from the post-Brexit social landscape, high

percentage of drug use amongst residents, and challenges of high unemployment and low educational attainment.

Our speakers discussed how neighbourhood development plans need to move away from surveying and must instead begin with conversation. If we are to ask for and use the time and energy of our communities, we must ensure that these efforts are put towards to achieving the developments our residents truly want to see. PIP shows an example of how to do this. The group set up a community decision making panel, where anyone can join and discuss priorities as well as ideas and identify actions. The group now delivers activities for all ages - including sports and dance workshops for young people in the area - alongside providing opportunities to develop skills in the local community, such as social organising, cooking and gardening.

Creating the space for community engagement

Communities want their neighbourhoods to thrive, and they will want to be involved in neighbourhood development. The neighbourhoods with the greatest challenges benefit from creating space for conversations - council representatives can do this. They can simply go in to communities and start conversations, which in turn can build community cohesion. Most of the time residents in deprived neighbourhood will not have the time and energy to seek out ways to voice their concerns or showcase their ideas. That is why councils must initiate co-production themselves, and in a way that is accessible and tailored to their local area.

For example, SARA in Southwick, Sunderland. Southwick is a changed area – special occasions such as bonfire night previously led to anti-social behaviour, illegal fires, and damage to emergency service vehicles. To deal with this pattern of behaviour and achieve longer-term community solutions to improve health and wellbeing, environmental and housing standards, and local community facilities and access to services (including for young people) a multi-agency partnership, [Southwick Altogether Raising Aspirations](#) (SARA) was set up. This involved creating a space where a range of services would all sit under one roof in a community hub. Part of the approach was to take badges taken away from police officers and others from the statutory sector services, creating a space in which “people can just be people”.

An engagement officer was also recruited who walks the streets and talks to people, finding out what issues need to be addressed and co-producing solutions, with SARA engaging in 2023 with over 5000 residents through community events. In 2024, crime is down 12% and anti-social behaviour down 20% compared to the previous year, with 33 out of 55 addresses identified as causing crime and/or anti-social behaviour no longer causing issues. The team has secured over £1.2million funding into the area, with key outcomes including a Peer Support Mental Health Project and DWP funded Health Coaches operating from the hub.

The Council wanted to see if the SARA concept and way of working could be replicated in other, very different parts of the City. This led to the creation of [HALO \(Hetton Aspirations Linking Opportunities\)](#), based at the Hetton Centre in the heart of the ward that it covers, and which saw a crime detection rate of 34% in its first year, in comparison with the area command detection rate of 8.5% and the force detection rate of 9.3%. Another initiative based in offices with shop-front

branding in the City Centre is [SAIL \(Sunderland Altogether Improving Lives\)](#), bringing together the expertise of partner agencies including the business community to work collaboratively to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour. SAIL is supported by a four strong team of Violence Reduction Unit Staff to work with young people involved in offending. The early impact of the project was seen in the 33% decrease in anti-social behaviour reports in the first month of operation in comparison with the previous five week period. Every councillor now wants a hub like these in the community, but there simply is not the resource for this.

Another example of community engagement can be seen in Stoke-on-Trent council, where priority neighbourhoods have been identified and a community worker has been employed to create whatever it is that is needed for that community to build the necessary social capital.

This type of work can be seen as a gamble, but a risk-averse funder cannot make the necessary changes that our communities need. Programmes like [Big Local](#) have shown that this type of work, handing control over to residents themselves and building the capacity for them to make changes themselves, can help to mend the tears in the social fabric and the disorder we have seen across the country.

Funding and building capacity

There are challenges to setting up projects like the Portland Inn Project (PIP) in Stoke - a community led project which aims to meet the needs and respond to the aspirations of residents of the neighbourhood. Funders being risk adverse almost stopped the project from taking off - the

group were told they were not fundable due to a lack of social infrastructure in the area and the extent of community need. PIP was made possible through the support of [Creative Civic Change](#), which provided some of the necessary funding, and enabled the community to set their own priorities.

This untied, core funding has been key to PIP' s success. The project shows how targeted support can create sustainable assets for community members now and in the future. Furthermore, because of the scarcity of such funding and how precious it is, it is even more vital that we target it to those who need it most - those neighbourhoods with the highest levels of deprivation and the lowest social capital.

Funding schemes also need to take a long-term approach and plan for future generations of local families. These discussions need to be at the neighbourhood level in order to learn what local people really need to create a brighter future for their area. For communities like those in Stoke-on-Trent, there are so many immediate issues that it can be very difficult for people to plan for what they need now, let alone think about the future. But discussing what we can do over the longer term can be liberating, providing inspiration and increasing ambition.

Long term patient investment, is needed to build confidence, trust and capacity - and whatever the next national scheme for cohesion is, we need to work locally and long term.