

From partnerships to planning: a summary of Government proposals on community and neighbourhood governance

The Levelling Up White Paper (LUWP) published in February 2022 set out a vision to address economic disparities and level up the most deprived or 'left behind' parts of the UK. Largely, this programme is rooted in traditional forms of devolution, with a commitment to handing power and resources to local authorities, metro mayors and regional leaders. But the paper also commits to "put in place a bold new approach to community empowerment"; and begins to map out a programme of work to achieve this (DLUHC, 2022a:215).

Government has acknowledged that proposals are currently skeletal, and that it is in the process of planning in-depth consultation and stakeholder engagement to put flesh on the bones of what has been outlined. Some proposals contained in the White Paper complement those in other proposed legislation and policy, most notably, the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill. This briefing summarises current proposals within the theme of community and neighbourhood governance, with the aim to provide background for discussion on the potential opportunities and challenges posed by different approaches.

Proposal 1: Reviewing current models of neighbourhood governance

The UK Government committed to begin work with partners in local government and civil society on a programme to revive and renew neighbourhood governance. The main facet of this is a review of current models of neighbourhood governance in England, with the aim of "looking to make it easier for local residents and community groups to come together, set local priorities and shape the future of their neighbourhoods" (DLUHC, 2022a: 215). The review will also look at the role and functions of parish councils in England and how to make them quicker to establish.

Proposal 2: Piloting community partnership approaches, including Community Covenants

In the LUWP, Government also proposed piloting new models of community partnership to "make local power a reality" (DLUHC, 2022a: 215). Community partnership would "empower local people to shape the place they live, influence local services and take control of community spaces" (DLUHC, 2022a: 215). The pilots will provide learning through "experimentation and doing", and enable Government to test for impact and value for money (DLUHC, 2022a: 215). Approaches will then be evaluated and considered for scaling nationally (DLUHC, 2022a: 215).

The LUWP says that a testing phase will now commence with partners in local government and civil society to design an approach to community partnership. Further details are promised later this year.

One model to be tested is Community Covenants. Initially recommended by Danny Kruger MP (2020:14) in his report to Government on how to sustain and expand on the community response to COVID-19, Covenants would be a "mutual commitment by citizens, civil society and the state...to fulfil their discrete responsibilities and to work together for the common good." Government's response to the Danny Kruger MP's report fleshed out what this might mean in practice, proposing "agreements between councils, public bodies and communities" who would share power and resources in order to "enhance places and improve public services" (DCMS, 2022). In the response

Government also committed to begin testing with partners in local government and civil society the design of Covenants, something which was reinforced in the LUWP.

Proposal 3: Reforming the planning system to give communities a better say

The LUWP policy programme includes a basket of measures to enhance the role of community and place in the planning system. Most notably through acting on Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission recommendations, which include: the creation of an Office for Place; promoting engagement with local communities; simplification of local plans; enhanced compulsory purchase powers and support for regeneration and brownfield development.

The May 2022 policy paper on the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill – the Bill had its first reading that same month - committed to giving communities more agency to decide what is built, where and how. As well as giving neighbourhood plans greater weight in planning decisions, the paper states that the Bill will increase the accessibility of neighbourhood planning by allowing parish councils and neighbourhood forums to produce a simpler ‘neighbourhood priorities statement’ which the local authority will be obliged to take into account when preparing its local plan (DLUHC, 2022b). The Bill also contains a provision that enables local residents to propose developments on their street and then determine, by means of a vote, whether those developments should be granted planning permission. This is meant to generate local buy-in for additional housing and “give more certainty to communities that the right homes will be built in the right places” (DLUHC, 2022b).

Proposal 4: Amending the Community Infrastructure Levy

The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is a charge, introduced in 2010, which allows local authorities to raise infrastructure funds from new development. The levy is currently payable from when a development is started. Although local authorities ultimately decide how the CIL is spent, they must allocate a ‘neighbourhood portion’ to parish and town councils - either 25 or 15 per cent of the total levied depending on whether or not a neighbourhood plan is in place. In areas without a parish or town council, the local authority must consult local communities, including neighbourhood forums, on how the neighbourhood portion is spent.

In 2020, Government’s Planning for the Future White Paper proposed to replace the CIL with a mandatory nationally-set value-based flat rate charge, called the Infrastructure Levy. As this will be payable at the point of occupation – and so after a development is completed - concerns have been raised that essential infrastructure improvements will not be addressed in time to meet local need.

Proposals to amend the levy were reiterated in the LUWP – but this time with the aim to “explore how the existing levy can be used to support neighbourhood and community activity” (DLUHC, 2022a: 217). The LUWP also promised to “continue the neighbourhood portion of the CIL” as the new Infrastructure Levy is introduced (DLUHC, 2022a: 217). We are waiting for further detail to be published.

Reference list

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