

Summary notes

Think neighbourhoods: Unleashing the power of our neighbourhoods

A 3ni members event

Tuesday 15th July 2025 | 12.30pm–4.00pm | Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ

About 3ni

3ni is a new social value partnership bringing policy and practice together to transform neighbourhoods across the UK. Through collaboration and innovation, we support local government and the wider public sector in driving meaningful, lasting change from the ground up. Through our national network for neighbourhood improvement, we share and shape best and next practices that help disadvantaged communities rebuild. Our research, events and activities are designed to equip public sector partners with what works, and crucially, how to apply it.

Our approach is rooted in what makes places thrive: strong local connections, empowered communities, and the social infrastructure essential to long-term regeneration. Drawing on evidence, data, and proven tools, we help our partners enable community-led change, turning insight into real-world impact. Inspired by pioneering local authorities and initiatives like Big Local, we know that investing in existing community networks leads to faster, more successful transformation.

At a time of growing pressure on public services, 3ni is helping bridge the gap between local need and effective action, strengthening support for stronger, fairer, and more resilient places.

About ICON

Launched in September 2024, the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (ICON) was set up to review the current state of neighbourhoods across England. It will rigorously examine the role of neighbourhoods in people's lives, quantifying and qualitatively exploring the case for neighbourhood focused regeneration as a contribution to achieving wider social and economic objectives. The Commission will also establish 'what works' by drawing on both international and domestic evidence, with a particular focus on the most deprived and 'left behind' communities.

The Commission is chaired by Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top and supported by a small, cross-party group of experts, practitioners and others with a keen interest in neighbourhood issues. Its work will examine the case for a new focus on neighbourhoods in national policy as a means of addressing multiple disadvantage, regenerating communities and enabling government to achieve its mission objectives.

Funded by Local Trust, the Commission is run by an independent secretariat and commissioners will be supported by an academic panel, a lived experience panel and a representative group of community sector organisations.

At a glance

- The event brought together 3ni local authority members from across the country to explore the emerging policy agenda for neighbourhoods based on the work of ICON and the government's Plan for Neighbourhoods
- Discussion centred on whether we were in a 'neighbourhoods moment', and with the government's Plan for Neighbourhoods, Trailblazer Neighbourhoods and announcement in the Spending Review, how we could build on this momentum to create a movement for neighbourhoods
- Local authorities welcomed the focus on hyperlocal need, but highlighted challenges around flexibility, culture, data use, and capacity, both of councils and local communities
- Trust, social infrastructure and relational and participatory approaches were identified as essential for effective neighbourhood working
- Participants support the call for a national neighbourhood strategy, backed by coordinated governance and long-term, sustained resources, targeted at disadvantaged and high community need areas, with a debate needed on how to devolve budgets and decision making to neighbourhoods
- Investment was needed in people, and community development and capacity building, not a focus on capital

Summary of discussion

Participants explored themes including trust and community voice, data and evidence, governance, funding autonomy and structural reform. A repeated concern was that funding and policymaking continue to be top-down and fragmented, often excluding local understanding and context and failing to reach the neighbourhoods most in need. Communities, it was agreed, need to be at the heart of decision making. Yet many neighbourhoods lack the social infrastructure to enable residents and communities to engage with councils or access funding opportunities. Participants shared experiences of working relationally with communities and emphasised the importance of listening, building trust and ensuring that investment is not short term, but is sustained over time.

There was discussion around governance at a hyperlocal level. While some felt local authorities were best placed to lead, others pointed to Combined Authorities or community organisations as potential delivery partners. Many agreed that responsibilities across tiers of government needed further thought and could be better coordinated, particularly given the current focus on local government reorganisation.

The role of evidence and data was a key theme. 3ni members expressed interest in understanding where their localities sat in relation to ICON's new Hyperlocal Needs Measure, and other indices such as the Community Needs Index. However, some people cautioned against an over reliance on quantitative data alone, and stressed the importance of incorporating lived experience and community narratives into policy design, to be gleaned from community engagement and qualitative research.

Concerns were raised about funding rigidity and capacity within councils and communities. Participants shared examples of co-design initiatives which offer practical models for community-led commissioning. Others highlighted the ongoing challenge of delivering neighbourhood focused work within stretched budgets and systems not geared to long-term local investment.

Finally, there were reflections on the need for a national framework to sustain momentum, support local actions and embed neighbourhood priorities across government departments, in order to overcome Whitehall silos. Without this, it is feared, that there may be a repeat of past initiatives that failed to achieve lasting change.

Presentation 1: Andrew O'Brien, Head of Secretariat, ICON

Andrew O'Brien introduced the work of ICON, outlining the rationale behind its establishment and the evidence base underpinning its interim findings. He described the development of the Hyperlocal Needs Measure (HLNM), a measure created to provide a snapshot of the condition of England's neighbourhoods against five different types of need reflecting the government's five missions.^[1]

The HLNM provides the analytical framework to support the identification of Mission Critical Neighbourhoods (MCNs) and Mission Priority Neighbourhoods (MPNs), the 2 per cent and 20 per cent of areas respectively furthest away from meeting the government's missions. Andrew outlined how these communities face deeper and more complex disadvantage than national averages suggest and often lack the social infrastructure to engage with or benefit from mainstream government programmes.

Andrew shared early evidence showing that hyperlocal interventions, particularly those centred on building social infrastructure, deliver significant improvements in employment, health and crime reduction. Drawing on the legacy of programmes like Big Local he stressed the need for a coordinated and long-term approach to rebuilding local foundations. Andrew concluded by emphasising that although MCNs account for a small proportion of the population, they represent a disproportionate share of areas where life expectancy falls below 70. Supporting these communities, he said, is not only socially and economically urgent, but politically and morally essential.

Presentation 2: Ben Glover, Head of Policy Analysis, ICON

Ben Glover gave an overview of ICON's Green Paper, published in May 2025, which outlines a new policy framework for neighbourhood-level action. The paper draws on public polling, community visits, policy workshops and lived experience to present a comprehensive case for change at the national and local levels.

Ben described how the decline of local economic activity, the retreat of the state and the dismantling of community institutions has created deep social fractures in many neighbourhoods. ICON's Green Paper proposes a broad three-pronged approach: investing in social infrastructure, reforming public spending and rewiring central government. Ben outlined specific proposals such as Neighbourhood Expenditure Audits, Neighbourhood Agreements and pooled Neighbourhood Budgets. These tools are designed to increase transparency, coordination and local control over public investment. He also suggested the creation of a Neighbourhood Recovery Unit and Excellence Centre to support implementation.

While the Green Paper focuses on social infrastructure, he noted that ICON's final report will include recommendations on employment and local economic growth, following additional research over the summer. Ben closed his presentation by encouraging local authorities to submit feedback to the consultation before 25 July 2025.

[1] Economic growth; Opportunity; Health; Crime; Energy.

Key themes

Urgency of action for Mission Critical Neighbourhoods: MCNs face severe and entrenched disadvantage. There is a pressing need for targeted, long term intervention supported by social infrastructure and responsive governance if government is to meet its mission objectives.

Importance of social infrastructure: Strong local networks, community hubs and relational working are vital foundations for addressing economic, health and community safety challenges and a key ingredient for what makes a 'good life'. Social infrastructure enables communities to engage with local funding opportunities, the public service improvement agenda opportunities. Participants discussed whether we needed a universal definition of social infrastructure, and whether there should be a minimum baseline of provision in each community.

Trust and relational engagement: Residents want meaningful engagement and visible action. Consultation fatigue is real. Rebuilding trust requires consistent, respectful relationships, action-orientated engagement and a shift away from transactional or extractive consultation models.

Hyperlocal delivery and neighbourhood definition: "Hyperlocal" means different things in different places to different people, from estates to small communities within towns. Natural neighbourhoods can be self-defined and understood in terms of lived experience, not just statistical geographical boundaries.

Coordinated governance and roles across tiers: There is a need for better clarity and coordination between local authorities, Combined Authorities and community organisations. Participants called for greater mediation across tiers to ensure grassroots voices are heard and acted upon.

Data, evidence and lived experience: Tools such as the HLM, the CNI and Discovery are valuable tools for identifying priority areas. However, it is important to combine quantitative data with qualitative insights, lived experience and participatory evaluation. Funding flexibility and community power: Top-down funding models limit local innovation. Participants shared examples of co-designed commissioning being more effective and empowering approaches. Calls were made for more local autonomy and trust in communities.

Importance of community capacity building: There are people in every community who are passionate about their local area, and have the potential to be community leaders. What is needed is encouragement, support and appropriate training to enable local residents to play a bigger role locally.

Capacity and pressure on councils: Local authorities are under significant pressure, with limited staff and budget capacity to engage at a neighbourhood level. There were concerns about the administrative burden of passing on funds to communities without adequate support.

Learning from past programmes: There was reflection on the success of previous neighbourhood initiatives like Big Local, the New Deal for Communities and Sure Start. Participants highlighted the need for a national plan and institutional framework to coordinate future investment.

Structural reform and reorganisation: Discussions around unitarization and political change prompted questions about how structural shifts can support, rather than disrupt, hyperlocal working. Maintaining local networks was seen as critical during the reorganisation process, as well as a focus on the importance of the internal cultural change that is required as well as structural change.

Role of external partners: Combined Authorities and the private sector have important roles to play but must act as enablers rather than displacing local leaders. Ensuring social value and accountability were key considerations.

Next steps

- The consultation on ICON's Green Paper remains open until 25 July 2025. Local authorities and community partners are encouraged to respond with reflections and recommendations.
- ICON will analyse the consultation findings over the summer and publish its final report in Autumn 2025.
- 3ni and Capacity will continue to support engagement across the local government sector.
- Workshop participants are encouraged to continue conversations within their localities and share learning with peers. Updates and further resources will be shared via the 3ni network.
- The next 3ni members event will be November 25th 2025.

For further information, please contact celia@3ni.co.uk

