

## Summary notes

# Neighbourhoods in Practice: Rebuilding the Nation

A 3ni members' event

Tuesday 25th November 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.

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 new and existing community networks leads to faster, more successful transformation.

## About ICON

Launched in September 2024 by Local Trust and chaired by Baroness Hilary Armstrong, the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (ICON) has been reviewing the state of neighbourhoods across England and their role in people's lives. It has drawn on international and domestic evidence as well as visits to doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods across the country to identify 'what works' in neighbourhood regeneration, with a focus on the most deprived and 'left behind' communities.

ICON has published nine research and policy reports, with recommendations for all levels of government. Its next report is due for publication in January 2026.

## Key Takeaways

The session examined how neighbourhoods can drive local transformation and how different levels of government can support a shift from top-down to bottom-up policymaking. It also looked at how councils can build trust and strengthen community connections. Participants reflected on the presentations and discussed ways to increase trust, rebalance power between councils and communities, and look at practical ways to make Pride in Place more than just a slogan.

- **Trust and community engagement are essential.** This needs to be done consistently and steadily, not only with residents but also with the third sector.
- **An asset-based approach is the way forward.** Instead of focusing on vulnerabilities, this approach starts with what strengths a community has and encourages residents to build from there.
- **Social capital is key.** Bringing people together and strengthening communities enable residents to experience better life outcomes and, eventually, economic growth.
- **Break down silos.** Institutional dynamics can be a barrier to delivering effectively at neighbourhood level. Divergent priorities, bottlenecks and a lack of constructive dialogue can all get in the way of finding a common purpose.
- **Difficult, honest conversations often need to be had,** and organisations need a clear vision of what they hope to achieve. Policy integration and cross-disciplinary work were also identified as areas where trust needs to increase.
- **Rethink communication.** It can be difficult for councils to communicate milestone achievements in the face of sometimes challenging public perceptions of local authorities. Focusing on community-led narratives, removing logos and not forcing outside agendas can help bridge gaps between residents and councils where trust may be low.

## A neighbourhood moment

Andrew O'Brien, Head of Secretariat at ICON, started the session by talking about the state of neighbourhoods across England and the policies recently introduced to support them. He highlighted that there is a clear 'Neighbourhood moment' taking shape, with 17 initiatives in central government and £10bn allocated so far. The Government has shown it is firmly on board with the neighbourhood agenda. However, policies alone are not enough; they need to be underpinned by an understanding of which neighbourhoods to target and a strong theory of change.

ICON identified three types of neighbourhoods that will benefit the most from these initiatives:

- Coastal communities (20%): have older, less diverse populations. They have strong social cohesion but low levels of social infrastructure.
- Deindustrialised periphery (57%): a fairly stable family demographic but disengaged. They are based in urban areas but are disconnected from opportunities.
- Dynamic Inner Cities (23%): ethnically diverse with strong social assets and access to job markets. However, employment and health outcomes remain well below national averages.

For ICON, these are the areas the Government needs to prioritise to shift long-term dynamics and improve access to opportunities. To support this, they have developed a three-phase Theory of Change:

- Phase 1 – Social Foundations: this focuses on the building of community-led social infrastructure, creating opportunities for people to meet, form connections, and build social capital.
- Phase 2 – Social Outcomes: More social capital leads to better outcomes in health, crime, education, and drives employment.
- Phase 3 – Economic Development: With better outcomes come better opportunities, as these areas become more likely to attract economic investment. This, in turn, creates more job opportunities and sustained investment.

While much of the national conversation has centred on economic growth, ICON argues that a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Reconstruction should first focus on phases one and two of their Theory of Change. Only once the foundations are in place can a full economic strategy be effective. Without social capital, the economic growth the Government seeks is unlikely to materialise.

## The Essential Eight

To get the basics right, ICON identified eight areas that neighbourhoods need to strengthen in order to create sustainable change.



These pillars form the basis for neighbourhood reconstruction and should be central to any government policy aiming to reverse the negative dynamics within our neighbourhoods.

Andrew concluded by emphasising that this work will be messy at times and it will take several decades before these neighbourhoods are thriving again. It is work that requires patience and a careful consideration of the timely, effective and collaborative development of each phase, rather than jumping straight to phase centring economic growth. The good news? There is a clear roadmap for neighbourhoods to move forward, and the keys to activate the first two phases rest with policymakers. Now, it's about turning theory into action.

## **Stoke-on-Trent: a unique place with big hopes for the future**

The second presentation was delivered by Vicki Gwynne, Communities Programme Lead at Stoke-on-Trent City Council. Stoke-on-Trent is distinctive: it has six towns within its boundaries with a proud history of craftsmanship and strong, tight-knit communities. However, some neighbourhoods face significant challenges, with high levels of deprivation affecting residents' life outcomes. Communities struggle with low wages, poor work-life balance, lack of transport links, and limited leisure time.

Vicki is from Stoke-on-Trent and previously worked at Middleport Matters before joining the council. Middleport Matters is a resident-led community organisation with a strong hyperlocal focus and deep trust among local people. Moving into a council role marked a significant shift for her, bringing a broader remit, new organisational structures, and the challenge of working within a system that many residents did not fully trust.

## **Strengthening Communities**

Before Vicki joined the council, initiatives such as the Family Matters Programme and Community Lounges were already helping improve local outcomes. While having a positive impact on the community, Stoke-on-Trent City Council wanted to go further in involving residents in shaping change.

In 2024, the Council and partners began developing a new programme called 'Strengthening Communities'. With funding from Public Health and support from 3ni, the programme made use of hyper-local data to identify areas with the highest levels of community need, targeting four clusters of doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods - those with both high levels of deprivation and low levels of social infrastructure - in need of focussed attention and support.

Why does social infrastructure matter? Vicki shared Middleport as an example. Despite similar deprivation scores on the 2019 Index of Multiple Deprivation to other areas, Middleport has lower crime levels, fewer child services cases, and a stronger voluntary sector. Overall, it performs better because it has stronger social capital—the bonds and connections that bring people together and open up access to opportunities.

This is a key ingredient in developing an asset-based approach to community development. Capacity and resources need to be built from the ground up to enable communities to create change themselves. To do this, Strengthening Communities has five distinct outcomes it is trying to achieve:

- Better access to community facilities for local people and groups
- Increased number of volunteering opportunities for local people
- More projects taking place, from ideas developed by the community
- Residents report they are more satisfied with the area they live in
- Residents report increased physical and mental wellbeing

This is a long-term process. Change does not happen overnight, but with consistent effort and honesty, community dynamics will shift.

## Challenges

Vicki doesn't shy away from acknowledging that there are challenges with this approach. She jokingly recalls how many asked her what the 'dark side' was like when she moved over to the Stoke-on-Trent City Council. It speaks to a bigger issue: trust in councils is low and questions around fund spending are common. Moreover, choosing priority neighbourhoods brings its own challenges, as other areas may feel left out, creating feelings of division.

There are also challenges within communities themselves. Not all communities are uniform, and misinformation has contributed to polarisation and even hate crimes in some areas. Meanwhile, some people are struggling just to get by and are not in the right space to volunteer or look beyond their immediate circumstances. Local organisations working in these spaces may also struggle to bring people together as some work in silos, hindering partnership working and limiting effective solutions.

The work of Strengthening Communities is to unpick these issues. In their methodology, the team highlights three areas to focus on, to build trust within the community and remain flexible to its needs.

- Agreeing a shared purpose and outcomes rather than setting fixed performance targets
- Starting with informal conversations and identifying what matters most to the community, rather than pre-determined solutions.
- Demonstrating a collaborative approach to determining priorities, working with people and trusted organisations.

## Putting this into practice

The group discussed the difficulty of moving away from traditional processes to a space that puts community at the centre. It requires trust in residents and VCSE organisations to take the lead without so much of the council's input, which is a shift in approach from traditional methods. However, councils explored how the trust and power shift can take place slowly, with some councils talking through smaller, more flexible grants that started putting communities in the driving seat. Another council explained how residents coordinating on a single, high visibility campaign created a snowball effect. From this one campaign, residents gained the confidence to take the lead on other projects, and public agencies and communities became more comfortable working together.

Another recurring theme was the challenge of siloed working within councils, and the difficulty of collaborating when priorities compete and resources are stretched. As a result, the ambition to place communities at the heart of decision-making can easily slip down the agenda when other pressures intensify.

An asset-based approach offers a promising way forward. By focusing on the strengths and resources that already exist within communities, councils can foster resilience and innovation. However, this approach cannot succeed without time and investment. Trust must be rebuilt patiently, and communities need the support to develop their capacity to lead change.

## Conclusion

Speakers and participants recognised the challenges they were facing. However, a sense of common purpose and ambition was palpable. Participants understand why this matters. While nobody denied that councils are operating in a difficult environment, there is a willingness to look at neighbourhood working and think about how councils can work differently. 3ni will continue to bring these conversations together to inspire, connect and inform councils and partners across the public sector on how to embed a bottom-up, community-led approach in their work.