



national network
for neighbourhood
improvement



Independent
Commission on
Neighbourhoods

Community Capacity Building in Practice: A St George's House Consultation

Putting communities in the
driving seat of neighbourhood
improvement

July 2026



**national network
for neighbourhood
improvement**

About this report

This report summarises the discussion at a St George's House consultation organised in partnership between 3ni and ICON in February 2026. The event gathered practitioners and leaders from local and central government, community organisations, funders, academics, and civil society to explore how community capacity building can be put into practice in neighbourhood improvement. The discussions centred on how communities can be supported to lead change locally, and what local authorities, national government, partners and funders need to do differently to make that possible. This report aims to reflect the consensus that emerged from these discussions and not the detailed policy positions of all the organisations that participated.

About 3ni

The national network for neighbourhood improvement is a learning network for local government, the wider public sector and communities that supports policy and practice towards neighbourhood working and community-led regeneration. Set up and incubated by Local Trust in 2024 and now hosted by Capacity CIC, 3ni creates a space for collaboration and innovation to drive meaningful, lasting change where it is needed most.

About ICON

The Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (ICON) launched in September 2024. The Commission is reviewing the current state of neighbourhoods across England, examining 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 is also establishing '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. Funded by Local Trust, the Commission is run by an independent secretariat and commissioners are supported by an academic panel, a lived experience panel and a representative group of community sector organisations

Acknowledgements

With thanks to all participants who contributed to the consultation, including representatives from local government, community organisations, funders, civil society and academia. Special thanks to Baroness Hilary Armstrong, chair of ICON, for opening the discussion and setting its terms with characteristic directness and depth. Thanks also to all participants who contributed written reflections after the event. Fun4Kids, Wigan Council and Stoke-on-Trent City Council are thanked for allowing their work to be featured as consultation case studies in this report.

Thanks to Andrew O'Brien, Head of Secretariat, ICON for facilitating the consultation.

Published July 2026. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit [Creative Commons — Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International — CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)



Front Cover: Sunderland study visit 2025
Photo: Von Fox Promotions



Contents

Introduction	2
Background	4
Community capacity building (CCB): what do we mean by it, and where are we now?	7
What would it take to build community capacity?	12
What next?	22
A moment that demands more than a programme	26
A final note on peer learning	28
References	30

Introduction

Where communities have the conditions to organise themselves, benefitting from the relationships, trust, the resources and the confidence to act on their own initiative, they don't just survive, they thrive. That's one of the clearest lessons from decades of neighbourhood research (CRESR, 2023), and from the direct experience of communities across England that have built the capacity to act on their own terms, as evidenced by the Big Local programme (Learning from Big Local, 2026).

Baroness Hilary Armstrong, who chairs the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods and opened the consultation, grounded this in her lived experience. In Sunderland, she remembered, collective life was organised through unions, working men's clubs, co-operative societies, churches and the shared rhythms of industrial employment. However, these were not just social institutions, they were the training ground for democratic participation, for communities to learn how to run things together, how to hold power to account, and how to collectively build their own future.

When de-industrialisation took hold, it didn't only destroy local jobs, it also removed this essential scaffolding through which communities self-organised and which enabled members to support each other in daily life. And while women entered the workforce and the economy shifted, the forms of civic association that sustained collective action in many places did not keep pace. In too many communities, the result has been a mentality of waiting, for 'the organisation in power' to bring the sort of change that is needed, while residents feel powerless to initiate it themselves.

The challenge we face isn't informed by a nostalgic desire to recreate the past, but to understand what forms of connection, identity and leadership can support collective action now, and to build the conditions in which those forms can emerge. This makes the question of capacity building both practical and political. Practical in the sense of residents and local organisations needing time, space, resources and skills to build capacity. It is political too because capacity is inseparable from power. It is the enabling factor that determines who decides what matters, who controls resources and prioritises where budgets are allocated, who carries risk, whose knowledge counts, and whether institutions are willing to change their own behaviour.

Background

Community capacity building (CCB) is concerned with how communities develop the agency to act on the conditions shaping their own lives. It is about whether residents, groups and local organisations have the confidence, relationships, resources and practical routes to come together, identify what matters, and turn local priorities into sustained action (Frontier Economics, 2024). At its strongest, it allows communities not only to respond to change, but to initiate it, shape it, hold institutions to account for the role they play in enabling or frustrating it (Frontier Economics, 2024).

This is not a new concern, nor is it simply a delivery question for the latest wave of neighbourhood programmes. Communities have always organised around shared needs, common assets, local identity, mutual support and moments of crisis. But in many disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the local social infrastructure that once helped people to organise has been weakened, while the pressures facing residents have become more complex (Local Trust, 2021). Capacity building therefore needs to be understood as a long-term process of strengthening the conditions in which collective action becomes possible.

This consultation came at a moment of genuine political opportunity. The Pride in Place Programme (PiPP) and the Community Wealth Fund together represent a commitment of more than £6 billion to neighbourhood improvement. Several other government initiatives such as Neighbourhood Health, Neighbourhood Policing and the

Cabinet Office's Test, Learn and Grow programme reflect Westminster and Whitehall's interest in mainstreaming neighbourhood thinking into core public service delivery. The scale of national attention to neighbourhood-level change is, by some measures, unprecedented, but also comes at a time when the wider Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector is facing resource pressures of its own that make the expansion of community capacity all the more challenging, and while many communities are experiencing real problems of their own on issues including the cost of living crisis and community resilience. The question is not whether the investment is significant. It is whether it will go deep enough.

Whilst PiPP, the Community Wealth Fund and other hyper-local programmes have brought renewed policy attention to this agenda, and create an opportunity to place community leadership closer to the centre of neighbourhood improvement, the starting point cannot simply be how to make those programmes work. CCB matters in its own right because thriving and successful places need the ability to organise, deliberate and act before, during and beyond any single funding programme (Macmillian, 2026).

The consultation began from the recognition that evidence from previous regeneration initiatives offers an important lesson: change is more likely to last when local people have a meaningful leadership role (CRESR, 2023). It set out to explore what this looks like in practice, and what it would take to put communities genuinely in the driving seat of local regeneration initiatives and activities, focusing on a single central question:



How can communities be supported to lead neighbourhood improvement, and what should the state, funders and local authorities do to enable that leadership in practice?"

Across four sessions over two days, participants explored four linked questions: what CCB means, how it relates to neighbourhood regeneration, what best and next or promising practice looks like, and what this agenda demands of communities, the state and funders.

This report is structured around the themes that emerged across those four sessions. It begins with the fundamental question of definition: what CCB actually is, and what it is not. It then turns to practice, the conditions, approaches and institutional behaviours that make capacity building possible in disadvantaged and disinvested neighbourhoods. It closes with recommendations for the different parts of the system that need to act.

Community capacity building (CCB): what do we mean by it, and where are we now?

The consultation began with an exercise in definition. Participants broke into four groups and were asked to agree on a statement about what CCB means. They came back with four answers, and the differences were striking.

For one group, CCB was fundamentally about shifting power and resources from government and public sector institutions to residents and communities. For another, the emphasis was on the ability of communities to guide long-term decision-making through asset ownership, through local leadership, or through having people rooted enough in a place to act as its long-term custodians.

The other groups emphasised the relational dimension, such as trust, belonging, and the reciprocity underpinning everyday connection. There was also focus on the organisational networks, groups and associations through which collective action becomes possible.

More striking than the differences, though, was what all four groups rejected. None described CCB as training programmes or volunteering schemes or the creation of more community projects.

Towards the end of the conversations it seemed that there were several other areas of broad agreement that the group had settled on, namely that CCB is about ensuring communities have, over the long term, the confidence, relationships, resources, knowledge and

routes to power needed to identify and develop shared priorities, and to act on them.

This aligned with findings from previous research, specifically Frontier Economics' 2024 review on what it takes to build community capacity which identified it as a process through which "local areas... build skills and knowledge but also boost confidence in their own abilities to bring about change".

Five broad areas of agreement emerged on what CCB means in practice, what it cannot be allowed to become, and what it demands from institutions:

1) CCB should not mean asking communities to absorb risk and responsibility on behalf of the state

Across the consultation, conversation returned repeatedly to issues of power. Participants were clear that communities who have built genuine capacity to make decisions on their own terms should be allowed to get on with it. But that is different from being 'left alone'. Even the most self-determining communities should expect a relationship with local and national government as well as the broader public sector, that is positive, enabling and, above all, not patronising.

Participants were unanimous: this should never amount to an abandonment of the position of the state in these communities, or see them being asked to solve problems that wider policy failure created. The expansion of community power must come with the resources, support and legitimacy that the effective exercise of power requires. CCB done properly expands what communities can do – it builds their collective efficacy. Done badly, it becomes a mechanism for transferring institutional responsibility and risks without transferring institutional resources.

2) Many communities do not lack capacity; they encounter systems that block it

Participants recognized that in many, if not all communities, there is at least some latent willingness to want to be more active drivers of the future trajectories of communities. The most common experience encountered was not an absence of will or energy in communities, but the constant collision with systems designed without them in mind. Fragmented and short-term funding that makes it impossible to sustain activity beyond the programme cycle; procurement rules that exclude smaller organisations; a culture of risk-aversion in statutory bodies; and a persistent feeling of being 'done to' – of top down control and of having decisions made about a place by people who do not live there.

There was a telling provocation from a participant in the first session who described a community funding reform in Minneapolis, USA, where a decision was made to give money and decision-making power directly to fifteen community groups, not to voluntary sector organisations that claimed to speak for them, but to residents themselves. Whilst the organised voluntary sector wanted the funding, the police department that was overseeing the reform refused, and insisted the money go directly to the local communities. How each community used it was completely different. Despite the very different context, the point demonstrated the importance of the principle: that communities respond differently when they hold genuine power, and well-intentioned (but often self-appointed) intermediaries can be as much of a barrier to community leadership as statutory institutions.

CCB therefore needs to be as much about changing state and public sector systems as it is about supporting communities. Residents and community groups can have ideas, energy and legitimacy, but still be stopped by funding rules, inaccessible processes, risk aversion, siloed services or institutional assumptions about who is qualified to lead.

3) Capacity is built through relationships, social infrastructure and doing things together

The practical examples that speakers brought to the consultation showed CCB that grows through repeated opportunities to meet, organize, contribute, fail safely and build confidence over time. There was a wealth of practical ideas raised by participants on what this looks like in action: supporting truly independent community resources and no-agenda spaces; greater deployment of micro and small grants; listening campaigns; peer-to-peer learning networks; and dedicated community workers rooted in their places over the long term. These are the routes through which informal activity becomes more durable. Capacity building is not a one-off intervention or a technical training package – rather it is a long-term process of building collective efficacy.

4) The neighbourhood policy moment is an opportunity, but also a risk

PiPP and related initiatives create a real opportunity to put community leadership at the centre of neighbourhood improvement, at scale. But participants were clear that the starting point cannot be how to make a government programme work. To some extent, there was a feeling in the room that CCB was in itself its own separate thing that required its own dedicated policy and practice thinking. Fundamentally, it is about ensuring that communities are sufficiently resourced, skilled, and motivated to take decisions in their own interests.

CCB is about having the capacity to collaborate at any point in time, not at a point that is set to begin and end along the timeline of any one government programme. Without this shift in thinking and approach, there is a risk that new neighbourhood investment would merely reinforce existing power dynamics, create more consultation without control, or turn local community organisations into gatekeepers for resources rather than enablers of wider participation.

PiPP is, in one important respect, a significant step: the first major recent government programme to put community engagement and leadership at its core. But without a shift in how power flows, there is a real risk that new neighbourhood investment merely reinforces existing dynamics, creates more consultation without control, or turns community organisations into gatekeepers for resources rather than enablers of wider participation. The Neighbourhood Boards that govern Pride in Place will need to reflect actively on their own power - and on how to share it locally, creating the right conditions for long-term resident leadership.

5) The measures of success need to change

Traditional programme metrics often struggle to capture trust, belonging, confidence, resident leadership, the strength of relationships between organisations, and whether people have real routes to act on local priorities. These things are inherently difficult to track, and participants from community organisations in particular felt that much of the evidence that has to be provided to meet funding requirements does not reflect the natural messiness of doing community work.

Instead, participants stressed the need for much stronger emphasis on practice-based evidence: stories, relationships, local knowledge and learning generated through action. This does not mean abandoning accountability, but rather it means building accountability frameworks that recognise many of the most important outcomes of seeking to build community capacity may be relational, cumulative and visible only over a longer period than standard funding cycles allow.

Many of these challenges were interrogated in Frontier Economics' (2022) think piece on how the Community Wealth Fund might be evaluated: it recommended an approach to evaluation where accountability and impact measurement is balanced alongside recognition of the social and relational outcomes such a long term, neighbourhood led programme is expected to lead to.

What would it take to build community capacity?

Over the course of the two days, participants engaged in four sessions led by expert speakers and practitioners from government, community organisations and academia, followed by small-group deliberation and plenary discussion. The first two sessions focused on what CCB means in practice and how it relates to neighbourhood regeneration, renewal and evidence. The second day turned to good and next practice, how capacity building can be embedded in policy, and what this means for communities, the state and funders.

The section takes stock of the core points of discussion that emerged from the groups across the consultation.

Point 1: When we talk about community capacity building, what are we actually trying to build?

When it came to how CCB should be defined, although the four groups came back with slightly different emphases there was broad agreement on what CCB is at its core. Participants agreed that it is not about 'activity being delivered' within a specific neighbourhood. Rather, community capacity building should be focused on building up the capacity of people and organisations to organize, act, and lead on the things that matter most to them, at any time.

For one group this was about a fundamental "decentralisation of power, skills, and resources" to the neighbourhood level. Another group placed greater emphasis on local 'stewardship' – be it through community asset-ownership or through local leadership (or personnel capacity) to guide longer term decision making.

A central current that ran through each groups' definition was an asset-based approach: one that defines CCB as a process which identifies, magnifies and mobilises knowledge, skills and experience that already exist within communities, rather than parachuting in external experts or professionals who, when a certain programme or funding cycle comes to a close, will leave and take their tools and learnings with them. Instead, CCB was seen as the process by which latent capacities held by individuals and communities are nurtured, unlocked and channelled towards shared ambitions and projects (Dartington Trust, 2021).

This framing matters because it shifts attention from what institutions do to communities, to what communities are enabled to do for themselves. Community capacity is not demonstrated by the number of meetings held or the volume of consultation responses gathered. It is demonstrated when residents have the confidence to constructively

disagree, and to determine what matters most through genuine deliberation rather than managed consensus. It is about the ability to access or control resources, negotiate with larger institutions and hold one another and public bodies to account.

For external organisations, this means accepting that community capacity grows through doing. Evidence from the longitudinal study of the Big Local programme shows that people become more confident by contributing, making decisions, working with others and seeing that their effort has consequences (Ellis Paine et al, 2026).

Participants' own knowledge and experience mirrored such findings: many repeatedly stressed the need to create space for such contributions itself, not only for polished plans or formally constituted organisations. The point is not just to build new community organisations and civic institutions. It is to widen the number of people who feel able to act as neighbours, organisers and stewards of their place.

Point 2: The current system deploys a degree of caution and skepticism against communities that want to develop, and take on, greater agency and responsibility. There is often a fundamental lack of trust in the system that biases decision-making against them.

A strong theme throughout the consultation was that communities are often described as lacking capacity when the more accurate problem is that systems make local action unnecessarily difficult. Even in doubly disadvantaged communities, it is rare that they have absolutely no capacity at all. Residents and community groups can have ideas, energy and legitimacy, but still be stopped by funding rules, inaccessible processes, risk aversion, siloed services or institutional assumptions about who is qualified to lead.

Participants described two canvases that need to be held together: what the state needs to do, and what communities are best able to do. CCB fails when these are confused. It should not involve transferring responsibility without resources, asking residents to solve problems created by wider policy failure, or using community action primarily as a way to save money. But nor should the state crowd out the functions only communities at the neighbourhood level can perform: building trust, creating belonging, organising around local priorities, brokering relationships between neighbours, and sustaining activity that has local meaning.

For local government, this means a more reflective role. The discussion touched on the need for councils and statutory agencies to acknowledge past harms, including instances where regeneration, service design or decision-making had not only damaged trust, but also created trauma. Participants talked about apology, power

and disconnection: apology because institutions need to recognise where they have got things wrong; power because local authorities and public bodies still hold many of the resources and permissions communities need; and disconnection because not everyone in a neighbourhood will want to engage in the same way, or through the same organisations.

The system role was therefore described less as command and control, and more as protection, enablement and brokerage. One phrase that captured this was the idea of local government as a 'dome of protection' for communities. This includes using public power to make it easier for communities to act, protecting community-led work from being crowded out by markets or institutional priorities, and ensuring that procurement, planning gain, social value and public spending support the local ecosystem rather than extract from it.

Case study from the consultation:

Fun 4 Kids and L30 Community Centre

Fun 4 Kids emerged from a local need for childcare and has developed over two decades into an organisation operating across 11 sites, employing around 60 people and engaging hundreds of children. Its approach at the L30 Community Centre is rooted in asset-based community development, beginning with the local strengths inherent in the people, place and the environment, and allowing activity to evolve from local relationships rather than a fixed institutional agenda.

One test of capacity, discussed in the session, is whether leadership and activity can continue even when the original founders or senior staff step back. This is community capacity as durability.

Point 3: Community Capacity Building requires a whole ecosystem, not a single delivery body. Community leadership requires dedicated, independent resources that communities can draw upon as and when required. Fundamentally this ecosystem and access to resources cannot be stop-start, they must be permanent in order to ensure that community capacity is enduring over the long term

One feeling shared across attendees was that often CCB can easily become something that is too organizational, or at risk of being institutionalised. Funding and influence can flow to the most visible local institutions, while smaller groups, informal networks and new voices remain outside the room. Participants noted that the voluntary and community sector can be a crucial enabler, but can also become a gatekeeper if resources and legitimacy are concentrated too narrowly.

Several participants therefore argued for thinking in terms of neighbourhood ecosystems. This includes community anchors, informal associations, mutual aid groups, faith and cultural organisations, schools, health services, businesses, funders, local councillors, public services and residents who may not belong to any formal group. The aim should be to strengthen the relationships between these actors, clarify roles and create routes for new activity to emerge.

This ecosystem needs both wide and deep engagement. Wide engagement is needed so that a small group of usual suspects does not become the whole community. Deep engagement is needed because long-term change depends on residents grappling with more fundamental questions: what matters to us as a community;

what do we want to take action on; what support do we need; and what are we willing to build together? Participants suggested tools such as listening campaigns, small flexible grants, community connectors, peer learning, independent networks and 'no agenda' spaces where people can meet without immediately being turned into a programme audience.

The idea of a 'mycelium network' captured well: a decentralised web of relationships that allows communities to exchange knowledge, support one another, and sustain activity beyond any single programme or institution. In practical terms, this points towards more community workers, more peer support, more onward grant-making by trusted community stewards, and more flexible funding for small sparks of local activity that may later grow into something larger.

Case study from the consultation:

Stoke-on-Trent Strengthening Communities

Participants heard how the city of Stoke-on-Trent had been supported by 3ni to use hyper-local data to identify clusters of doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods and focus support through its Strengthening Communities approach. The example highlighted the importance of trust, resident voice and social capital. Middleport and the Portland Inn areas were discussed as places where stronger local social infrastructure appeared to support better outcomes than might be expected from deprivation levels alone, underlining the importance of community relationships as a foundation for change.

The consultation repeatedly returned to the question of resources. Power without resources is symbolic; resources without power can reproduce the same top-down relationships. Participants discussed the importance of getting money into communities in ways that allow residents and groups to act as developers, stewards and decision-makers, not just as consultees or delivery subcontractors.

Independent money matters because it changes the relationship between communities and institutions. When local groups are entirely dependent on council-controlled funding, it can be harder for them to challenge, negotiate or act as equal partners. Participants also discussed the potential role of philanthropy, community funders, asset ownership, endowments and long-term funding models, while recognising that asset ownership is difficult in practice and can create responsibilities as well as power.

The CWF and PiPP were both seen as opportunities to build this kind of independent community power, especially if funding can be flexible, long-term and capable of supporting onward grant-making. But participants were also cautious. If community funding is captured by existing gatekeepers, or if boards and partnerships reproduce institutional habits of control, then the promise of CCB will be weakened. Pride in Place boards, for example, will need to reflect actively on their own power and on how to share it.

Although the consultation discussed specific mechanisms, programmes and funding models, participants repeatedly returned to culture. CCB depends on institutional behaviours that are difficult to mandate: humility, patience, trust, willingness to share credit, tolerance of risk, and the ability to act without knowing precisely what the final outcome will be.

Case study from the consultation:

Wigan Council's Progress with Unity

Wigan Council's Progress with Unity approach was discussed as an example of a local authority trying to build a different culture around communities. Principles included seeing the person first, listening, being humble, knowing the place and doing the right thing. Participants also noted the importance of investing in internal culture change, including shared learning across the council, so that community-led approaches are not confined to one team or programme.

Wigan Council has also been clear about the value of independent community resource and what this means in practice: when community groups have access to resources that sit outside council control, they are more confident, more able to challenge and to act as genuine equal partners. The relationship between local authority and community changes. That is not seen as a loss for local government, but rather a gain for the whole community and partnership working.

Point 4: The bigger barriers to developing community capacity are culture and political, not technical.

There are also real tensions. Some communities come together around a particular cause, but wider partnership work can expose conflict and disagreement. Not everyone wants to be involved. Some residents do not have the time, energy or headspace to participate because they are dealing with immediate pressures. Communities are not homogeneous, and local issues can be nationalised or weaponised through social media, especially where local journalism has withered. Any serious approach to CCB needs to face those difficulties rather than assume consensus.

Participants also challenged the way evidence is used. Evidence-based practice remains important, but CCB also requires attention to practice-based evidence: stories, relationships, local knowledge and learning generated through action. Evaluation should therefore ask not only whether a programme spent money or hit short-term targets, but whether trust, belonging, resident leadership and local capacity have grown.

This implies a different attitude to failure. If communities are genuinely leading, plans will change, some activity will not work, and partnerships will involve disagreement. Space to fail is therefore not a weakness in design; it is a condition of learning and ownership. The alternative is a low-risk version of participation that keeps control with institutions and asks communities only to endorse decisions already made.

What next?

Four broad areas emerged as critical to what is needed to underpin community capacity building: that participation must be permanent, not programme-led; relational community development must be invested in and recognised; the importance of reforming the systems that undermine communities; and aligning policy with community timescales, not the other way around; and better and more appropriate evidence and data. The recommendations below build on these features.

1. Make participation permanent, not programme-led

The single most important structural shift is treating community participation as a permanent feature of neighbourhood improvement initiatives and neighbourhood working more broadly, not as a phase to complete before spending or activities begin.

For central government, this means setting a clear expectation that neighbourhood programmes involve a meaningful transfer of control, resources and decision-making to communities — moving far beyond minimum requirements for resident consultation. It means building long-term, flexible funding routes for community infrastructure, community development workers, small grants programmes, and support for peer learning, and using recent devolution reforms and emerging neighbourhood governance as genuine mechanisms for community power, not just new institutional layers without local legitimacy.

For local authorities, it means going where communities already are, rather than expecting residents to come to formal processes designed by institutions. It means reflecting honestly on institutional power and past harms and failures. And it means reforming procurement, commissioning, planning gain and social value practice so that public spending actively supports neighbourhood investment, wealth and health building and local community ecosystems.

2. Invest in relational community development, and recognise it as a profession

CCB depends on people: community workers, connectors, organisers and local resident volunteer leaders who build relationships, hold space for disagreement and sustain activity over the long term. These roles are systematically under-resourced and under-recognised.

One participant, made a case in post-consultation reflections that deserves particular attention: that a recognised qualification or training framework for community development work would go a long way towards embedding shared values and practice across sectors and institutions. Not because experienced practitioners need formal credentials, but because a recognised pathway could support community members who want to pursue community development work in their own neighbourhoods — and because it would provide a foundation for professionalising a field that deserves to be taken seriously. With further investment coming through PiPP and the CWF, creating that framework now could pay real dividends: strengthening practice, building confidence, and ensuring investment translates into meaningful and sustainable outcomes.

For funders and programme designers, this means resourcing independent community power — through supporting approaches that allow communities to challenge, negotiate and act as genuine equal partners. It means not concentrating resources only in the most established local organisations, and designing funding routes that leave space for new voices, informal groups and smaller unincorporated associations. Such approaches will involve supporting

practice-based evidence and learning, recognising that stories, relationships and local knowledge are often central to understanding whether local community capacity is genuinely growing.

3. Reform the systems that block community action

Communities need more than investment: they need public institutions open to honestly scrutinising, challenging and changing their own behaviour, particularly when it blocks or undermines collective community action (APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods, 2023). Procurement, commissioning, planning gain and social value frameworks currently tend to favour larger, more established organisations, often at the direct expense of smaller, community-rooted groups with genuine local insight, legitimacy and a contribution to make (APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods, 2023). Reforming these systems is not just a technical exercise but also a political choice about whose knowledge and experience counts.

Local government needs to use its convening power to build supportive neighbourhood ecosystems: creating conditions in which community anchors, informal groups, public services, funders, businesses and residents work collaboratively rather than competitively (ICON, 2026). This includes protecting no-agenda spaces, supporting community workers and connectors, and creating conditions for staff to work relationally rather than only transactionally.

Young people need to be brought into these conversations as active participants, not as an afterthought. This is particularly important given the Pride in Place agenda and its ten year programme of change, the results of which will ultimately benefit and belong to those people growing up in these neighbourhoods now. Building routes for their voice and leadership within a local community is not optional, and should be integral to broader approaches to capacity building.

4. Build the evidence base that communities deserve

The evidence base for CCB needs to reflect the reality of what communities experience and deliver, and not just the metrics that government and other funding bodies find easy to count. This means developing accountability frameworks that value trust, belonging, participation, resident leadership and a neighbourhood's strengths, alongside more conventional programme outputs.

It also means investing in better hyper-local data. Tools like the Community Needs Index and Social Capital Score which map social infrastructure and social capital respectively across England provide a foundation, but new measures need to be able to show what is happening on the ground, and to unpick changing conditions over time. They also need to be combined with evidence generated locally by and in the community to give a full picture of where capacity is growing and what is making the difference.

A moment that demands more than a programme

The final session focused on what the discussion means in practice for communities, the state and funders. A practical agenda should connect system change with action in neighbourhoods, recognising that no single actor can deliver CCB alone, but that each part of the system has specific things it must do. The ideas below are those expressed by different participants in the consultation, on how parts of the system may begin to think seriously about community capacity and their contribution towards its development.

For national government and programme designers:

- Set a clear expectation that neighbourhood programmes should transfer meaningful control and resources, not only consult residents.
- Give places enough time for engagement before major spending decisions are locked in; several participants suggested that serious community spending should follow sustained engagement rather than rushed project selection.
- Build long-term, flexible funding routes for community infrastructure enabling resource for community workers, small grants, peer learning and onward grant-making by trusted local stewards.
- Develop accountability frameworks that value trust, belonging, participation, resident leadership and the strength of local ecosystems, alongside more conventional programme outputs.

- Use emerging neighbourhood governance and devolution reforms as potential mechanisms for community power, while ensuring they do not simply create new institutional layers without local legitimacy.

For local authorities and public services:

- Reflect honestly on institutional power, past harms and the ways public systems can block community action.
- Go to where communities already are, rather than expecting residents to come to formal processes designed by institutions.
- Use councils' convening power to build neighbourhood ecosystems: community anchors, informal groups, public services, funders, businesses and residents working - collaboratively rather than competitively.
- Reform procurement, commissioning, planning gain and social value practice so that public spending and development support local social wealth.
- Create no-agenda spaces, protect community workers and connectors, and support staff to work relationally rather than only transactionally.

For funders and partners:

- Resource independent community power, including funding that allows communities to challenge, negotiate and act as equal partners.
- Support practice-based evidence and learning, recognising that stories, relationships and local knowledge are often central to understanding whether capacity is growing.
- Avoid concentrating resources only in the most established local organisations; design funding routes that leave space for new voices, informal groups and smaller associations.

- Support peer learning between places, including a possible follow-up cohort from the St George's House consultation to refine a practical model for community capacity building.

For communities and local organisations

- Begin with what people care enough about to act on, rather than with programme categories or institutional priorities.
- Build associations and alliances that allow people to contribute as neighbours and citizens, not only as service users.
- Hold institutions to account, while also building internal accountability within community-led work.
- Protect space for disagreement, learning and failure as part of genuine local ownership.

A final note on peer learning

Peer learning between places is perhaps one of the most underused tools in neighbourhood improvement. The consultation itself produced connections, insights and brokered relationships that no single publication could have generated. There is an opportunity for participants to form a follow-up cohort meeting to refine a practical model for CCB that could support initiatives such as Pride in Place, drawing on the learning from their own areas and testing it against what was discussed over two days in Windsor.

References

3ni and OCSI (2026). Social Capital Score. Liverpool: 3ni (accessed June 2026) <https://3ni.co.uk/evidence/social-capital-score/>

About Big Local. Learning from Big Local (accessed June 2026). <https://www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk/about>.

All-Party Parliamentary Group for 'left behind' neighbourhoods (2023). *A neighbourhood strategy for national renewal: Final report of the APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods' inquiry into levelling up*. London: Local Trust.

Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) (2023). *A return to neighbourhood regeneration? Reassessing the benefits of a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal*. Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University.

Dartington Trust (2021). *Research in practice: Growing community capacity*. Totnes: Dartington Trust.

Ellis Paine, A., Munroe, E., Wilson, I., Wilson, M. *Learning from Our Bigger Story: Synthesising ten years of research findings*. Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University.

Frontier Economics(2022). *Community Wealth Fund think piece*. London: Frontier Economics.

Frontier Economics (2024). *Evidence on community capacity building and community leadership in the success of local areas*. London: Frontier Economics.

Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (ICON) (2026).

Convene, capacity build, coordinate: A neighbourhood working playbook for local government. London: ICON.

Local Trust (2021). *Policy spotlight 1: How social infrastructure improves outcomes.* London: Local Trust.

What does success look like in Big Local? Macmillan, R. Learning from Big Local (accessed June 2026). <https://www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk/resources/what-does-success-mean-in-big-local>.

About 3ni

The national network for neighbourhood improvement is a new learning network for local government and the wider public sector that supports policy and practice towards community-led regeneration. It was incubated and hosted by Local Trust in 2024.

3ni.co.uk

For more information about 3ni:

Email: info@3ni.co.uk

Visit: 3ni.co.uk

Local Trust



This is Capacity CIC, Suite 3A, 24 Queen Avenue, L2 4TZ.
Registration Number: 13356461.