

Power Partners

How community organisations are breathing new life into local democracy

Summary

We do not yet know the date of the next general election. But we do know that it will come soon. When it does, it will provide an opportunity to inject some much-needed optimism into our political debate.

A hopeful vision for the future can feel a long way off at the moment. We are living, as many now describe it, in an age of “permacrisis”. But at Locality, we recently published the [Locality Manifesto](#), which showcased how a positive new future is growing from the work of local community organisations. Right across the country, we see local people working tirelessly to build thriving neighbourhoods: regenerating local economies, reshaping local services, and reinvigorating local democracies. But generally they are doing this *against the grain*: in spite of wider policy systems, rather than with their active encouragement.

So as the general election creeps ever nearer, we are saying to politicians of all parties: imagine how much more we could achieve if we had those supportive systems in place? Imagine what community organisations could get done if it wasn't so hard?

Defying disengagement

Our experience of local elections illustrates this in a microcosm. We know that local election turnout has been generally low for some time. It's around 30% in standalone years, when local elections aren't held on the same day as a general election.¹

However, new Locality analysis shows this picture varies significantly by place – and that turnout is lowest in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.² This fact suggests a huge problem: that our formal, representative democracy is failing to connect in the places which arguably need it most.

For this report, we interviewed community leaders in some of the lowest turnout wards in the country. And their stories help explain why this is the case. As Mike Milen, CEO of Community Ventures in Middlesbrough sees it: “the living standards and challenges for the people living on the estate we serve just get worse. People are thoroughly

¹ House of Commons Library, 2023, “Turnout at elections”. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8060/CBP-8060.pdf>

² See p3 for our full analysis

disillusioned and simply don't believe that their vote will make any difference. The local view of politicians, if they register one at all, is simply 'they're all in it for themselves'."

Similarly in Hull, for Dave Coates, Centre Manager at Lonsdale Community Centre, "people don't vote in this area because they don't think it'll make a difference. People have low aspirations and expectations."

However, despite these huge challenges, when we speak to Locality members, we find a story of hope. It's of the kind we see across our network every day, where the big complex problems which Westminster consistently struggles to grip, are being radically tackled at a very local level.

Mike Milen explains: "we believe that the only way to change [political disengagement] is to raise people's expectations and give them the confidence to speak out and speak up for themselves. For this reason, we don't simply deliver services – but provide spaces where local people can make decisions about what happens in their communities. Spaces for them to try things, test things, make mistakes, learn and develop."

So as turnout numbers decline, community organisations are bucking the trend of political disengagement. They are engaging thousands through workshops, services and events; running community assemblies; creating neighbourhood plans; developing democratic governance models.

As Dave Coates puts it, "we believe that through showing our voices do matter, people can come to understand they do have power."

From "in it for themselves" to "in it for everybody"

We believe this shows politicians in Westminster the way forward. By getting behind local efforts, we can begin to turn the tide of low expectations and low participation. But at the moment, national politics is more likely to block local community engagement than bolster it. So the Locality Manifesto shows how the next government can end centuries of centralisation and turbocharge the community power that is attempting to rekindle local democracy.

Key to this is establishing a Community Power Act. The Act is the key demand of [We're Right Here](#), a campaign driven by eight community leaders and backed by a coalition of eight national organisations like Locality. Previous governments have come into office promising to shift the balance of power, but have failed to achieve it in practice. The Community Power Act would provide the strong foundations we need for a decisive reset. It would introduce a powerful new set of community rights, and create new power sharing agreements between councils and communities.

These “Community Covenants” would support the community-led initiatives which are already starting to transform local democracy, providing the fair policy wind they need to maximise their impact. Community organisations are building a deep and dynamic *participatory democracy* – which with the right support can be the perfect partner to our more formal, but necessarily more static, *representative democracy*.

Voting in elections – whether local, regional or national – will always be the cornerstone of our democracy. However, in a complex world, turning out at the polls once every few years can’t possibly be enough to fully reflect the range of influence we want and need to have over the direction of our lives. By putting more powers in the hands of local people, we can build in ongoing influence and participation, to reconnect people with their neighbourhoods and build a politics that really is in it for everybody.

New research

We’ve conducted new research into voter turnout at local elections, comparing the wards with the highest and lowest turnout at the last elections in May 2023.

Average national turnout at those elections was 32 per cent, already less than half the turnout at the last general election. For those councils with elections in 2023, this number dropped below the 20 per cent mark in 167 wards.³

At the other end of the spectrum, there are 73 wards with turnout above 50 per cent.

There are many external, structural factors that affect whether someone turns up at their polling station on local elections day – working long hours to make ends meet, juggling childcare arrangements, their health and mobility, their sense of safety when they step outside. And, perhaps as a result of all of these things and more, a lack of faith in local politics to bring about change.

In fact, when you compare those voter turnout stats with aggregated data on, for example, income, crime, employment, education, health, housing, services and the environment, you find a direct link between political apathy and local disadvantage.

We mapped the turnout data above, as provided by The Electoral Commission, against the then Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government’s 2019 Indices

³ The Electoral Commission, 2023, “2023 England Electoral data”. Available at: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-09/2023%20England%20Electoral%20data.xlsx>

of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) scores for the 20 wards with the highest and lowest voter turnout at the 2023 local elections.⁴

For the lowest turnout wards, the average IMD score was 2.4. This means that, on average, they're in the 24% most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the country.⁵

For the highest turnout wards, that figure is 6.4 – in the 36% least disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

The tables in the Appendix at the end of this report set out in full the wards included in our analysis.

Community organisations supporting civic engagement

This story is one that local community organisations in disadvantaged areas are all too aware of. As a result, they're finding new participatory and community-led forms of civic engagement that give local people the voice to create the change they need.

In Brambles and Thorntree ward, **Middlesborough**, [Community Ventures](#) works as a community “anchor” organisation serving 6,500 people on the Thorntree estate. The neighbourhood sits in IMD 1, among the most disadvantaged areas in the entire country.

“We can, and will, remind people to register and to bring their ID – but this isn't really what's stopping people from voting. There just isn't the belief things will change.” **Mike Milen, CEO, Community Ventures.**

Whereas only 790 people voted in the last local election (13.7%), Community Ventures regularly engages over 2,000 local people in its free services, workshops, course, and events.

They also offer residential management and support for local homes with affordable rents and no bond or deposit. And they've partnered with Community Homes Tees Valley to generate even more affordable, safe, and sustainable community-led housing.

“At Community Ventures, we believe that the only way to change this is to raise people's expectations and give them the confidence to speak out and speak up for themselves. For this reason, we don't simply deliver services – but provide spaces where local people can make decisions about what's happens in their

⁴ This analysis excluded wards which were created / redrawn after 2019, when IMD data was last collected.

⁵ IMD score at ward level calculated by OCSI's Local Insight tool, based on the then Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government's data from 2019, available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019>

communities. Spaces for them to try things, test things, make mistakes, learn and develop.” **Mike Milen.**

Head a couple of hours south across the North York Moors, and there’s a similar picture to be found in **Hull**. In 2023, the city was home to nine wards with local elections turnout below 20%, more than anywhere else in the country.

In Newington and Gipsyville, just 13.3% of the electorate turned out to vote.

But [Lonsdale Community Centre](#), sitting at the eastern tip of the ward across the park from Hull City FC’s MKM Stadium, is changing the way people see and think about local democracy.

“People don’t vote in this area because they don’t think it’ll make a difference. People have low aspirations and expectations. But we believe that through showing our voices do matter, people can come to understand they have power.” **Dave Coates, Centre Manager, Lonsdale Community Centre.**

The Centre has coordinated Hull’s first ever Neighbourhood Plan. They’ve supported local people in this IMD 1 ward to develop their own plan for how and where homes, shops, offices and infrastructure are built in their community.

In total, the Centre engages around 2,000 people in its day-to-day activities – over 30 per cent more than voted in 2023.

Across the Humber in **Grimsby**, residents of the IMD 1 East Marsh ward are taking neighbourhood renewal into their own hands.

Through Community Shares – allowing individuals to invest in the community – [East Marsh United](#) has so far raised enough money to buy, refurbish and let 10 community-led homes.

They’ve also started work on an East Marsh Community Plan, taking the council’s renewal plan to the next level, and are facilitating a consultation and referendum on securing green space for a local community centre.

In a ward with voter turnout of just 16% in 2023, this represents a whole new approach of “flatpack democracy” – going straight to the grassroots and giving local people a say on the issues closest to their hearts.

“Engagement happens naturally through our events, and we’ve done a lot of door-knocking. We’re actually interested in people’s lives and as a result they will speak to us – it’s the human touch. A number of our services are led by local

people now – they decide what happens.” **Dan Humphrey, Operations Manager, East Marsh United.**

Finally, on the opposite side of the country, **Blackpool** is a town where nine of the 10 most disadvantaged areas in England can be found.

Sitting mostly in the central ward of Bloomfield, the sixth most disadvantaged in the country with a voter turnout of only 18.2%, is the neighbourhood of Revoe.

In 2014, it was assigned £1m as part of the National Lottery’s Big Local programme to form [Revoelution](#), a resident-led group creating activities and projects to tackle local people’s most pressing issues.

Having knocked on every door in the neighbourhood, the group understands the needs, hopes, and strengths of 1,200 local people. As such, they are now seen by the council and the NHS as the go-to organisation for working with the community.

“Our model is about community representation led by local people. Simply by creating a committee of local people and bringing them to meetings, they are now being listened to. Our mission is to engage and represent, be the voice of local people to public sector agencies” **Simon Lawton, Project Coordinator, Revoelution.**

Our policy proposal – Community Covenants

These examples show the potential for community power to revitalise our local democracy. But at present these efforts are happening within a deeply centralised political system.

To make the most of the opportunity, we therefore need a fundamental reset – to push power out of Westminster and into our neighbourhoods.

The next government can do this by introducing a Community Power Act. This pathbreaking piece of legislation would make the decisive shift in the balance of power local people have been waiting for.

The campaign for a Community Power Act is being led by [We’re Right Here](#), a coalition of community leaders from a range of backgrounds across the country and supported by Locality and a number of other national organisations.

Alongside introducing a new set of community rights, the Community Power Act would introduce Community Covenants. These would create power sharing arrangements between local authorities and local communities at the neighbourhood level. Such Covenants would provide the organisations we have highlighted in this report with the means to take their crucial work to the next level and give it a firm institutional footing.

There has been a growing focus on devolution of power from all parties. The current government's last budget set out plans to "empower local leaders by extending and deepening devolution across England".⁶ Labour's 2024 local election campaign was launched with the publication of "Power and Partnership", which said: "we cannot hold too many levers at the centre, where decision makers are inevitably constrained by a lack of local knowledge".⁷

However, at present most devolution efforts are focused on the sub-regional, combined authority level. This should, in theory, be a helpful first step on the way to unlocking greater community power. Regional governance arrangements are, after all, more local than Whitehall. Yet the general experience of combined authorities so far has not been transformative for community organisations. They have tended to shift centralisation from Whitehall to a regional level – or sometimes actually move powers further away from communities, by shifting focus from local authorities to combined ones.

We therefore believe that all parties need to get serious about *onward* devolution – and set out how their plans to empower regional leaders won't stop there.

Community Covenants can do this, by creating the right structures to ensure power "sticks" in a meaningful way at a hyper local level. As We're Right Here's report "Introducing the Community Power Act" sets out, Community Covenants would provide a flexible mechanism for community organisations and local people to take on more power to shape the areas they live, within the context of wider devolution approaches.⁸

Composition

When it comes to neighbourhood governance, there can be no "one size fits all" solution. So the Community Power Act would enable Community Covenants to be

⁶ HM Treasury, 2024, "Spring Budget 2024". Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65e8578eb559930011ade2cb/E03057752_HMT_Spring_Budget_Mar_24_Web_Accessible_2_.pdf

⁷ The Labour Party, 2024, "Power and Partnership: Labour's plan to power up Britain". Available at: <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Power-and-partnership-Labours-Plan-to-Power-up-Britain.pdf>

⁸ We're Right Here, 2022, "Introducing the Community Power Act". Available at: <https://www.right-here.org/asks/>

formed between local authorities and a range of potential “Covenant partners”, including:

- Parish and town councils
- Neighbourhood Forums (a designation which community organisations could take up)
- Established independent community “anchor” organisations
- New local alliances of community organisations, associations and informal and unconstituted groups

Powers

Once established as part of an agreed Community Covenant, Covenant partners would then be able to draw down a range of powers from an agreed menu of options. They would also receive resources and capacity building support to allow them to exercise these powers effectively in practice.

We envisage these powers covering a range of areas such as:

- Local economic planning – Community Economic Development (CED) is a powerful tool for communities to meaningfully shape the economy where they live. Community Covenants could strengthen these local collaborations by giving formal weight to CED plans in local growth plans and industrial strategies.
- Neighbourhood planning – Covenant partners could have statutory powers as consultees in Local Plans, and have the ability to designate as Neighbourhood Forums and develop Neighbourhood Plans
- Community assets – codesigning local community asset transfer (CAT) strategies. This might include instituting an assumption in favour of CAT, placing the onus on local authorities to disprove that it would be to the community’s benefit if a property or space were to be transferred to a community organisation or group.
- Local service delivery – designating Covenant partners as trusted delivery partners to break down procedural barriers to community-led provision. This could be done through a service-level agreement or similar non-contract based mechanism, using local authorities’ existing grant-making powers rather than an external procurement process.

- Government funding streams – exerting control over how local regeneration funds are spent, linked to We're Right Here's proposal for a new "Community Right to Control Investment"
- Scrutiny of spending decisions – having statutory powers to contribute to budgetary decisions from the local public sector

Accountability

Along with new powers for neighbourhoods, must also come greater responsibility. So in order to form a Community Covenant, Covenant partners would be expected to demonstrate how they would be appropriately accountable to their whole community.

The aim here would be to balance the dynamic but less formal accountability found in community-led governance, with the more formal but less participatory accountability provided by the likes of parish councils. To do this, Covenant partners would need to show how they meet five tests of local accountability:

- Earn and maintain the trust of the whole community
- Support everyone within their place to participate in community decisions and activities in an inclusive and equitable manner
- Practise 'dynamic local accountability' and community leadership based not just on consultations and voting but on ongoing community participation, relationships and local action
- Work proactively to identify and address shared issues and local concerns
- Make decisions so as to promote the interests of local people, rather than institutions alone

These tests would be assessed by the individual local authority entering into the Covenant. But oversight would be provided a Community Power Commissioner, which the Community Power Act would create, investing with the power to resolve disputes, where a prospective Covenant partner felt their local authority had made this assessment in an unfair or erroneous manner.

Conclusion

We believe the next government should commit to implementing a Community Power Act as a priority piece of legislation in its first 100 days. This would send a clear signal from the outset: that unlocking the power of community is a central means of achieving the government's ambitions and that it plans to govern in partnership with local communities across the country.

Polling for the We're Right Here campaign has shown that 71 per cent of voters feel they have "no" or "not much" control over important decisions affecting their neighbourhoods and local communities.⁹ This picture of disempowerment is echoed in the case studies we have shared in this report – and it's having a direct impact on the health of our democracy.

There is a huge opportunity here to make devolution the answer to this. But it needs to be something more than a technocratic exercise in passing power around different parts of the public sector. To really mean something to local people, it needs to put power directly in their hands.

The next government can do that by establishing Community Covenants as part of a wide-ranging Community Power Act.

More detail on the proposed composition of Community Covenants as well as the rest of the Community Power Act can be found in the We're Right Here campaign's report ["Introducing a Community Power Act"](#)

The campaign's website also contains powerful testimony from community leaders about how the Act could support their work and the impact of putting communities in control: <https://www.right-here.org/>

⁹ We're Right Here, 2022, "Taking back control for real". Available at: https://www.right-here.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Taking-Back-Control-for-Real_Were-Right-Here_.pdf

Appendix

Lowest turnout wards

Local authority	Ward	IMD	Turnout
Kingston-upon-Hull City Council	Marfleet	1	11.7%
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	Kingshurst and Fordbridge	2	11.7%
Colchester Borough Council	Tiptree	8	12.2%
King's Lynn & West Norfolk	North Lynn	1	12.4%
Kingston-upon-Hull City Council	Newington & Gipsyville	1	13.3%
Thanet District Council	Newington	1	13.5%
Middlesbrough Borough Council	Brambles and Thorntree	1	13.7%
Thanet District Council	Salmestone	3	14.3%
East Riding of Yorkshire Council	Goole South	3	14.5%
Ashford Borough Council	Stanhope	1	14.9%
South Kesteven District Council	Grantham Earlesfield	3	14.9%
North East Lincolnshire Council	South	2	15.1%
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	Chelmsley Wood	1	15.4%
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	Smith's Wood	2	15.5%
Dartford Borough Council	Parish Castle	6	15.5%
Preston City Council	Plungington	2	15.5%

Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council	Stairfoot	3	15.6%
Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council	Stockbridge	1	15.6%
Hartlepool Borough Council	Manor House	1	15.6%
Dartford Borough Council	Parish Stone Village	4	15.7%

Highest turnout wards

Local authority	Ward	IMD	Turnout
Bradford Council	Ilkley	9	53.4%
Great Yarmouth Borough Council	Fleggburgh	5	53.4%
Pendle Borough Council	Bradley Ward	1	53.7%
Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council	Werneth	2	54.0%
Leicester City Council	North Evington	3	54.6%
Lancaster City Council	Silverdale	9	54.7%
Cheshire East Council	Sutton	7	54.9%
Central Bedfordshire Council	Aspley & Woburn	8	55.0%
Winchester City Council	Badger Farm & Olivers Battery	10	55.5%
Lewes District Council	Lewes Priory	8	56.1%
Leicester City Council	Wycliffe	2	56.2%
Leicester City Council	Belgrave	3	56.4%
Lewes District Council	Ditchling & Westmeston	10	57.8%

Darlington Borough Council	College	9	57.8%
Lewes District Council	Kingston	6	58.3%
West Devon Borough Council	Chagford	7	58.7%
Darlington Borough Council	Hummersknott	10	61.2%
Brighton and Hove Council	Hangleton & Knoll	5	63.0%
Brighton and Hove Council	Hanover & Elm Grove	6	70.7%
Brighton and Hove Council	Preston Park	8	70.9%

Unlock the power of community with us

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