

NEIGHBOUR

HOOD

ASSEMBLIES

**A NEW MODEL FOR
NEIGHBOURHOOD
GOVERNANCE**

Community
Organisers

Together
with

**HUMANITY
PROJECT**



A policy report by Community Organisers and Humanity Project, setting out the case for Neighbourhood Assemblies as the preferred model for community empowerment under the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act.

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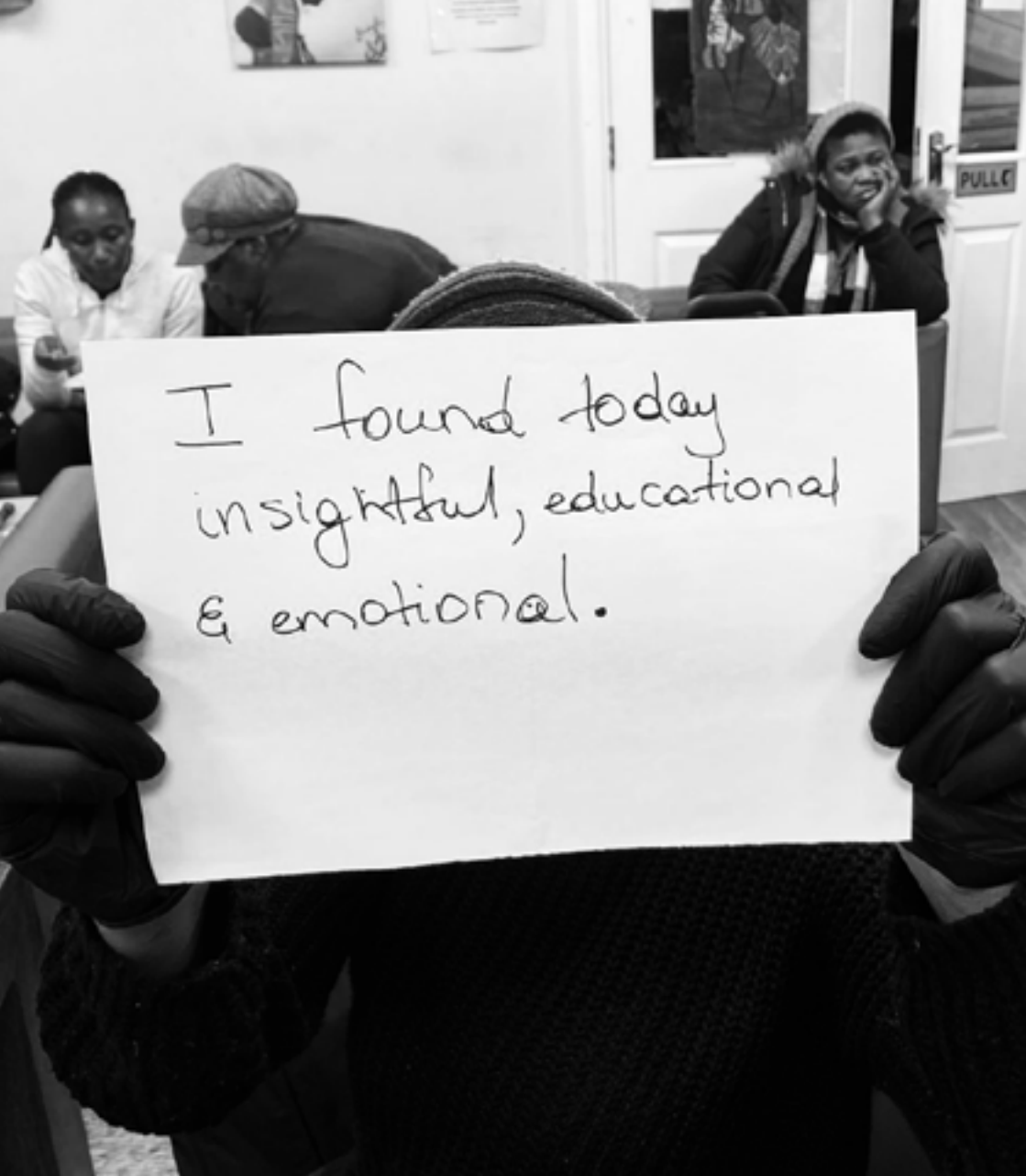
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I found today
insightful, educational
& emotional.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act creates a once-in-a-generation opportunity to strengthen neighbourhood governance across England. It arrives at a moment when racial tensions and division are rising. At the time of writing violence has erupted in multiple parts of the UK and many racialised and minoritised communities are reporting unprecedented levels of intimidation and fear. This act must be used to its best effect for the UK's diverse and multicultural population, to meet this moment. As communities, local authorities, and elected representatives consider what arrangements will work best in their areas, a critical question must be answered:

How do we ensure power is shared with communities themselves, rather than simply devolved between institutions?

Existing approaches - Area Committees, Parish Councils, Community Covenants - can play a valuable role in local governance. But none of them places residents themselves at the centre of listening, priority-setting, and action. That is what Neighbourhood Assemblies do.

Neighbourhood Assemblies are a new model of community-led neighbourhood governance: organised and facilitated by local residents and community organisations; funded directly by National Government as democratic infrastructure; rooted in approximately ward-sized areas defined by residents; shaped through listening campaigns and responsive to ongoing action; mandated to steward local budgets and shape policy priorities; and independent but complementary to existing democratic systems.

This report has been co-developed through structured interviews with 17 experienced community organisers and deliberative practitioners in the Humanity Project network. That network has a proven track record: in its First Phase (December 2023 to June 2024), Humanity Project supported 46 assemblies across 34 neighbourhoods, bringing together around 1,720 people and training 210 in facilitation and organising. Its Second Phase (September 2024 to August 2026) is currently supporting 19 community organisations across England and Wales to develop popular assemblies.





The model is not theoretical. The Marsh Farm People's Assembly in Luton - described in full in Section 3 - offers concrete evidence of what is possible: 194 listening conversations, 3,200 knock-and-drop leaflets, 150 residents deliberating together, and a council commitment to reinstate a community market within days of the event. organisations across England and Wales to develop popular assemblies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

♥ ***Endorse Neighbourhood Assemblies in forthcoming regulations.***

☀ ***Issue supplementary guidance to Pride in Place Neighbourhood Boards.***

▼ ***Apply a community-power test to neighbourhood governance.***

😊 ***Fund Neighbourhood Assemblies as democratic infrastructure.***

♥ ***Give assemblies real powers over budgets, assets and priorities.***

☀ ***Develop a national training infrastructure.***

▼ ***Define the role of elected representatives in assembly guidance.***

😊 ***Pilot, evaluate and scale nationally.***

THE OPPORTUNITY

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act is now law. Among its most consequential provisions is the requirement that all local authorities in England make appropriate arrangements to secure the effective governance of any neighbourhood area within their boundaries. The precise meaning of 'appropriate arrangements' will be determined through regulations made by the Secretary of State - regulations that will shape the quality of local democracy for a generation.

This is not a technical question about administrative structures. It is a question about who holds power. And the answer will determine whether the Act becomes a genuine vehicle for community empowerment or simply another layer of institutional reshuffling.

Why Neighbourhood Governance Matters Now

Britain's communities are facing serious, compounding challenges: economic inequality, housing insecurity, deteriorating public services, and a deep erosion of trust in institutions. These economic and political issues are contributing to the deepening divisions around race and identity that are affecting some communities in extreme ways in 2026.

Many people feel that decisions affecting their daily lives are made somewhere else, by someone else, without meaningful reference to their experience or priorities; we recognise that this lack of agency contributes to division and makes scapegoating a simple answer which many people are drawn towards.

Recent polling confirms this. Eighty-four percent of UK adults now report feeling that they have no or very little control over important decisions affecting their neighbourhoods (We're Right Here, 2025) - a figure that has risen by double digits in just a few years (Locality, 2023). Nearly half of all UK adults believe that radical change to the status quo is needed. This sentiment is shared across many sides of the increasingly politically polarised public (Ipsos, 2025).

The English Devolution Act arrives at this moment. Used boldly, it can begin to turn this tide. Used cautiously, it risks reinforcing the same institutional dynamics that produced the disillusionment in the first place.

The Landscape of Existing Proposals

Several actors have already put forward proposals for neighbourhood governance. The three most prominent are:

- ♥ **Area Committees** — championed by former local government minister Jim McMahon and already adopted by several councils. These are local authority sub-committees established to make decisions about a specific area. Their powers, agendas, and terms of participation are determined by the local authority itself.
- ☀ **Parish and Local Councils** — proposed by the National Association of Local Councils, the Local Government Institute, and the Society of Local Council Clerks. These are elected bodies, accountable through four-yearly elections, which exercise local powers under the General Power of Competence.
- ▼ **Community Covenants** — advocated by the We're Right Here campaign, Local Trust, Locality, and Power to Change. These are formal power-sharing agreements between councils and community organisations, already implemented in places like Wigan, Calderdale, Camden, and Ealing.

How do we ensure power is shared with communities themselves, rather than simply devolved between institutions?

The central challenge of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act

Area Committees keep decision-making within the local authority. Community Covenants move toward partnership, but between institutions and organised civil society - not with ordinary residents. Parish councils are elected, but elections every four years do not produce the continuous, deliberative engagement that community power requires.

The moment demands bolder proposals - ones that match the scale of the challenges communities face and the depth of the democratic renewal people are calling for. That is the purpose of this report.



OUR PROPOSAL

NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSEMBLIES

“Neighbourhood assemblies are a new model of neighbourhood governance that are organised and facilitated by citizens and community organisations, and funded directly by national government. They take place in approximately ward-sized areas that are defined by residents. The agendas are developed through listening and are responsive to ongoing actions. They are mandated to develop community-led projects, steward local budgets, and shape policy priorities. They are independent but complementary additions to existing democratic systems (i.e. councillors, officers and cabinet).”

Key Features at a Glance

- ♥ **Organised and facilitated by residents:** Local people and trusted community organisations run assemblies — not the local authority. This rootedness in neighbourhood life is foundational to their legitimacy.
- ☀ **Funded directly by National Government:** Neighbourhood governance should be treated as core democratic infrastructure, funded nationally. Local authority budgets should not be the primary conduit.
- ▼ **Approximately ward-sized:** The geographic scale is deliberately human — large enough to sustain collective projects, small enough for people to build genuine relationships and feel that issues directly affect their lives.

♥ **Defined by residents:** Residents, not administrative maps, determine where their neighbourhood begins and ends. Boundary-setting is an act of self-definition.

☀ **Agendas developed through listening:** Assembly questions emerge from systematic listening campaigns that reach people who would never attend a formal public meeting. The assembly is not a stand-alone event but a continuous cycle of listening, deliberation, and action.

▼ **Real powers:** Assemblies are mandated to steward local assets and budgets, and to shape policy priorities on certain topics. They must not become talking shops.

😊 **Independent but complementary:** Assemblies operate independently of party-political control whilst remaining connected to existing democratic systems — working with, not against, councillors, MPs, and officers.

HUMANITY PROJECT: Scale and Experience

This model has not been designed from first principles in a policy unit. It has been co-developed by 17 experienced community organisers and deliberative practitioners - with decades of experience between them - who have been piloting neighbourhood assemblies across England and Wales through the Humanity Project network.

Humanity Project

Humanity Project exists to create assembly culture: a new kind of politics that makes our lives better where we live. It is the freedom to speak and be listened to - a way of governing our own freedom where everyone's voice is equal.

First Phase (December 2023 – June 2024): 46 Popular Assemblies across 34 neighbourhoods, from Belfast to Bishop Auckland, from Nottingham to Kettering. Around 1,720 people participated. 210 people received foundational facilitation and organising training.

Second Phase (September 2024 – September 2026, ongoing): 19 community organisations across England and Wales are developing assemblies, including in Haringey, Luton, Islington, Bolton, Rochdale, Wigan, Birkenhead, Exeter, Sheffield, Oswestry, Wrexham, and more.

The Assembly Cycle

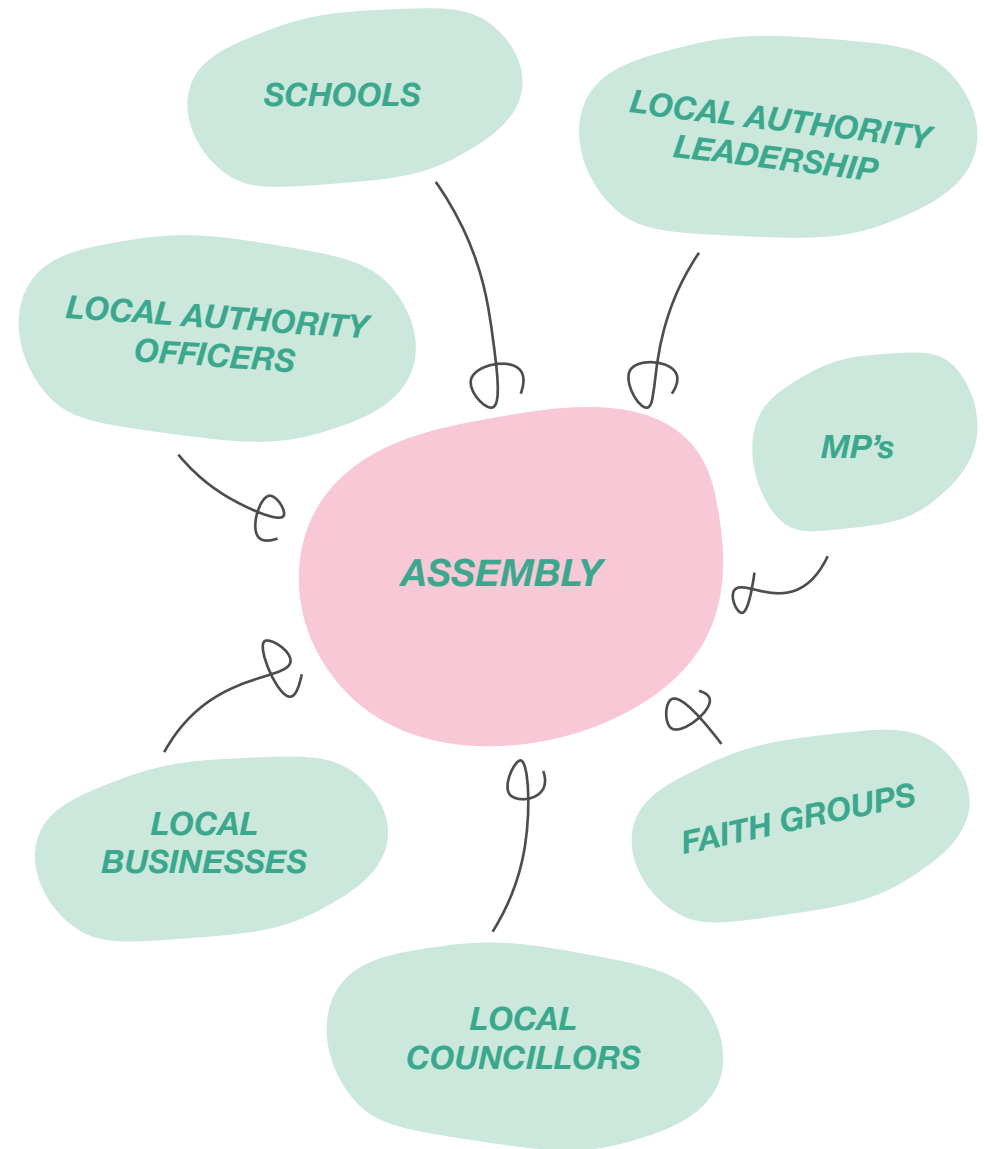
The model is not a single event but a continuous cycle of three interconnected phases: listening campaigns, assemblies and action between events.

- ♥ Listening campaigns: residents engage neighbours through one-to-one conversations;
- ☀ Assembly gatherings: a large, facilitated forum involving deliberation, decision-making and planning action;
- ▽ Action between assemblies: residents and partners working on agreed priorities.

The Assembly Ecosystem

Neighbourhood Assemblies do not operate in isolation. They sit at the centre of an enabling ecosystem of relationships and support. The diagram below illustrates this structure:

The Assembly sits at the centre, supported and connected to local authority officers and leadership, faith groups, schools, local businesses, local councillors, and MPs — all of whom resource and enable rather than lead and decide.



NEIGHBOURHOOD

ASSEMBLIES

IN PRACTICE

CASE STUDY: *Marsh Farm Peoples Assembly, Luton*

Context

Marsh Farm is a post-war housing estate of around 10,000 residents in Luton, built in the late 1960s. It is characterised by high levels of deprivation and a strong, distinctive community identity. Like many similar neighbourhoods, Marsh Farm has experienced decades of top-down regeneration and consultation, with mixed results. Physical redevelopment has brought investment, but residents have too often been positioned as recipients of change rather than shapers of it.

At the heart of the estate stands Futures House, the largest community-owned centre of its kind in the UK. Yet it had not always been well-connected to the wider community it was built to serve - many residents did not even know it was community-owned.

Against this backdrop, the Marsh Farm People's Assembly - led by Marsh Farm Outreach (MFO) and supported by Humanity Project - represents a deliberate shift towards community-led decision-making. MFO is a team of long-term local residents with decades of community organising experience. As they put it: "We are of Marsh Farm, by Marsh Farm, for Marsh Farm." That rootedness is not incidental to the model; it is foundational.

The Assembly Model in Practice

The Marsh Farm People's Assembly is not a single event but a continuous cycle of three interconnected phases:

- 😊 Listening campaigns: residents engage neighbours through one-to-one conversations
- 💖 Assembly gatherings: a large, facilitated forum where priorities are discussed and agreed
- ☀️ Action between assemblies: residents and partners working on agreed priorities

This reflects a core principle of assembly culture: democracy understood as an ongoing practice of listening, deliberation, and action - not periodic consultation or a one-off event.

Outreach and Listening

Ahead of the April 2026 pilot, organisers from MFO carried out 194 one-to-one listening conversations with residents across the estate - equivalent to roughly one in every fifteen households. They asked people about their experiences of living in Marsh Farm, their ideas for improvement, and whether they feel able to influence decisions that affect them.

These conversations were not a survey or a consultation exercise. Their purpose was threefold: to set the assembly agenda from what residents themselves said mattered; to build personal trust in the process before people were asked to attend; and to reach people who would not respond to a poster or a social media post.

MFO also delivered 3,200 leaflets using a knock-and-drop approach - knocking on doors to make personal introductions before handing over information. The emphasis on face-to-face contact was deliberate.

“We knew through long experience that people wouldn’t attend just because they saw a poster or liked a social media post. Many residents feel disconnected from official meetings and many don’t believe anything changes, so we needed to have face-to-face street level conversations with our neighbours.”

Rob Goodwin, Marsh Farm Outreach

The Pilot Assembly

On Saturday 25 April 2026, the first Marsh Farm People’s Assembly took place at Futures House Community Centre. Over 150 people attended, sitting around tables to deliberate.

Thirteen local residents and six members of Luton Borough Council’s Social Justice and Fairness Task Force had completed facilitation training with Humanity Project in the days before the assembly. Local MP Sarah Owen participated in the round-table deliberations. The presence of officers and elected representatives not as officials chairing proceedings, but sitting at tables alongside residents, was itself a demonstration of a different kind of relationship between community and state.

The atmosphere was deliberately designed to be the opposite of a formal public meeting. There was food, music, and arts. Pupils from a local school performed a song and displayed a banner they had made with local artists.

“Democracy shouldn’t feel cold, formal or bureaucratic; it should feel part of everyday community life.”

Glenn Jenkins, Marsh Farm Outreach

The assembly question - ‘Our Environment: what needs to happen to make our streets cleaner and our community spaces better used by and for Marsh Farm people?’ - had been chosen directly from what residents said during the listening campaign. At each table, residents deliberated and agreed three priorities. Table representatives fed back to the full assembly, and residents voted with stickers on a wall chart.

The three priorities that emerged were:

-  Better resident access to and benefit from Futures House and other community assets;
-  Better support, space and resources for young people;
-  Bring back the Marsh Farm Market.

Residents immediately put their names forward for Assembly Action Groups and volunteer working groups to turn each priority into action.

Impact

The impact was swift and tangible on several levels.

-  **Participants:** Almost everyone stayed for the full duration and signed up to an Action Group. Post-assembly feedback was strongly positive. One resident described the experience simply: “That made me feel powerful.”

♥ **Wider community:** In direct response to the assembly's priority, the council leadership committed to reinstate the community market — a visible, tangible outcome that the whole estate could see. Food vouchers given to all 150 participants were spent at Futures House's own café, which reported its best trading day since opening. The assembly also shifted community understanding of Futures House itself: many residents had not previously known it was community-owned, not council-run.

☀ **Officials and institutions:** Luton Borough Council's Social Justice and Fairness Task Force was a genuine partner throughout — attending design meetings, completing facilitation training, and supporting delivery on the day. Their head of team described the model as one they intended to roll out across the town. The University of Bedfordshire is now co-designing an evaluation framework with delivery partners.

The Question of Scale

A legitimate question is how those who did not attend - the other 9,850 residents - are engaged. The organisers are clear: the number attending the event itself is the wrong unit of measurement. The full participation cycle, from 194 listening conversations to the assembly itself to action between assemblies, is the meaningful unit.

Looking ahead, MFO is developing a street mobiliser model: residents in each street who can display information in their windows, pass on news, and feed concerns back to the assembly network. The ambition, over a year of quarterly assemblies, is for 500 or more distinct residents to have engaged in some form.

"People will see the video of the assembly, see some outputs, and think, 'it wasn't for nothing', and come next time."

Rob Goodwin, Marsh Farm Outreach

What Made It Work

- 😊 Resident-led organising: MFO's deep roots in the estate meant the assembly was trusted as genuinely community-owned;
- ♥ Face-to-face listening: 194 conversations and 3,200 knock-and-drop leaflets built personal trust before asking for participation;
- ▼ Agenda set by residents: the assembly question came directly from listening conversations, not from institutional priorities;
- 😊 Creative atmosphere: food, music, arts, and children's performances made the event feel welcoming and communal;
- ♥ Trained facilitators: 13 local residents and 6 council officers facilitated every table, ensuring structured and inclusive deliberation;
- ☀ Partnership working: Humanity Project, Luton Borough Council, Woodlands School, and 14 local community organisations all contributed;
- ▼ Visible immediate outcomes: the market decision gave residents concrete evidence that participating leads to real change.

Further Examples from the Humanity Project Network

Assemblies in the Humanity Project network have been designed for both communities of place and communities of identity. The following examples illustrate the range of applications.

Communities of place:

- 😊 **Ridgehill:** residents co-designed the offerings of a community hub, shaping the services and spaces available to the neighbourhood.
- ♥ **Prestwich:** an assembly supported the development of a neighbourhood plan, giving residents direct input into how their area develops.
- ☀ **Platt Bridge:** residents co-designed a local regeneration project, ensuring community priorities shaped a major investment programme.

Communities of identity:

- 😊 **Bolton:** an assembly explored safety for neurodivergent LGBTQ+ individuals across a broader geographic area.
- ☀ **Rochdale:** residents addressed access to healthcare for migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.
- ▼ **Islington:** an assembly focused on community safety for young people, bringing together residents with lived experience to shape local priorities.

WHY THIS MODEL BUILDS COMMUNITY POWER

What Community Power Means

Community power has become an increasingly influential concept in debates about democratic renewal and local governance. At its heart, it is based on the principle - drawn together from a significant body of evidence by New Local (2021) - that communities have a wealth of knowledge and assets within themselves, and are therefore well placed to identify and respond to challenges they face, and to thrive.

This is not a romantic or vague idea. It is an empirical claim: that communities, given the resources, authority, and support they need, make better decisions about their own neighbourhoods than external institutions do on their behalf.

The Current State of Disempowerment

Despite growing policy interest in community power, the principle remains far from the lived reality of most people in Britain's highly centralised political system. Many people still experience local decision-making as something done to them, rather than with them or by them.

The Scale of the Problem

- 😊 84% of UK adults now feel they have 'no' or 'not much' control over important decisions affecting their neighbourhoods (We're Right Here, 2025) — a figure that has increased by double digits in just a few years.
- ♥ Trust in politicians and ministers is at historic lows (Ipsos Veracity Index, 2024; British Social Attitudes, 2024).
- ☀ Nearly half of UK adults believe that radical change to the status quo is needed (Ipsos, 2025).



The Vicious Cycle – and How to Break It

The Future Governance Forum, in their paper ‘Mission Critical 04: Building a New Relationship between People and the State’ (2025), offers an explanation for this pattern. They describe a vicious cycle of disempowerment: outcomes are established from above; neighbourhoods have limited power to implement them; participation is low because decisions appear already made. And because participation is low, policy remains detached; because policy is detached, local needs go unmet - reinforcing the cycle.

But the same analysis shows that a virtuous cycle is also possible. When National Government recognises the centrality of neighbourhoods in determining their own development, and communities are equipped with the necessary powers and supported to act, cynicism turns to active participation. The feedback loop runs upward rather than down.

The difference between the two cycles is not primarily about community willingness or capacity. It is about whether participation is connected to genuine power. When it is, people engage. When it is not, they disengage - rationally.

Community-Led Governance as the Right Response

Community-Led Governance - co-governance - represents a fundamental reorientation of the relationship between residents and the institutions that shape their lives. Rather than development being something that happens to communities, it becomes something communities direct for themselves.

The defining institution of this model is one that is sovereign in its expression of the community’s collective will. Through it, residents come together to identify the issues that matter most in their daily lives, set agendas that reflect shared priorities, deliberate on where effort and resources should be directed, and plan actions that will bring about meaningful change. This is not consultation - it is genuine self-determination.

Community-led institutions are, in almost every case, in their infancy. They cannot yet walk unaided.

Without a strong and sustained ecosystem of support - from local authority officers and elected councillors, from anchor institutions such as schools and health services, from businesses and philanthropic organisations - they will struggle. The support required at this stage must be considerable, consistent, and genuinely committed to the community institution’s long-term success.

Over time, as these institutions mature and earn the confidence of those they serve, they can take on progressively greater responsibility. The ecosystem of support does not disappear - but its character evolves from scaffolding toward partnership.

This maturation requires a corresponding transformation in the role of traditional state institutions. The conventional model - in which local authorities control the direction of community development, allocating resources and setting priorities largely on residents’ behalf - must give way to something different. The state does not abdicate its responsibilities under co-governance, but it fundamentally reframes them: from control to enabling, resourcing, responding, and sharing power.

That shift is significant. It asks public servants and elected representatives to relinquish a degree of authority they are accustomed to holding, and to place genuine trust in communities to make sound decisions about their own futures. That trust is not misplaced. When community-led institutions are properly supported and given the resources to act meaningfully, participation grows - because residents can see that their involvement makes a tangible difference.

Community-led governance also delivers a deeper democratic dividend. It builds social cohesion by creating shared purpose. It surfaces local knowledge that would otherwise remain invisible. It develops civic capacity and leadership with lasting value beyond any single initiative. And it produces decisions that, because they are genuinely owned by those affected, are more likely to be implemented effectively and sustained over time.

Co-governance is not merely a mechanism for better service delivery. It is an investment in the democratic health of communities themselves.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

ASSEMBLY MODEL

IN DETAIL

The model was developed through structured interviews with 17 experienced community organisers and deliberative practitioners from the Humanity Project network. Each interview lasted 50 minutes, guided by 14 standardised question prompts covering scale, funding, facilitation, powers, and boundaries. The definition that follows represents the strong consensus that emerged; areas of ongoing debate are flagged as implementation considerations in Section 7.

Organised and Facilitated by Residents

- 😊 Local residents and community organisations tend to be more trusted than the local authority and are therefore better placed to create spaces with genuine local buy-in;
- ♥ Community-led organising helps assemblies feel rooted in neighbourhood life rather than imposed from above;
- ☀ Residents and local organisers tend to have deeper knowledge of local relationships, tensions, histories, and priorities than local authority institutions; and
- ▾ Community organisations provide important infrastructure — trusted spaces, networks, organisers, communication channels, and practical support — that help assemblies succeed.

Funded Directly by National Government

- 😊 Neighbourhood governance should be treated as core democratic infrastructure. National Government has mandated neighbourhood governance, so it should provide the necessary resources to properly implement it;
- ♥ Investment in participation is preventative spending that leads to better decisions, stronger communities, and less wasteful public expenditure overall;
- ☀ Public funding enables assemblies to be inclusive, sustained, and properly resourced;
- ▾ Funding is needed not only for events themselves, but for training, communications, and implementation;
- 😊 Funding should not be routed through the local authority, where it risks being wholly or partly absorbed into existing budgets;
- ♥ Direct public funding must be accompanied by proportionate audit, reporting, and accountability arrangements so that funds are used lawfully, transparently, and in ways that benefit the whole neighbourhood; and
- ☀ Funding levels should be determined through transparent national criteria combining a baseline allocation for every neighbourhood with additional weighting for population, deprivation, unmet need, inequality, and the capacity required to support inclusive participation.

Approximately Ward-Sized

- 😊 Ward-sized areas are small enough for people to build meaningful relationships, feel a shared sense of place and local identity, while still being large enough to sustain collective projects;



♥ Assemblies become less focused and less relational when operating at overly large scales such as entire cities or boroughs; and

☀ Several organisers stressed that the “right” scale is one where people feel the issues discussed genuinely affect their everyday lives.

Defined by Residents

😊 Residents themselves best understand where genuine neighbourhood identity and shared experience exist;

♥ Communities often identify with places differently from formal administrative maps drawn by government;

☀ Allowing residents to shape boundaries increases legitimacy, ownership, and participation;

Agendas Developed Through Listening

😊 Ongoing listening ensures assemblies are grounded in the real concerns and lived experiences of local people rather than institutional priorities;

♥ Listening campaigns help reach people who would never attend a formal public meeting but still want influence over decisions;

☀ Assemblies are not isolated events, but part of a continuous cycle of listening, deliberation and action;

▼ Responsiveness to ongoing actions builds trust because people see concrete outcomes emerging from participation; and

😊 Communities are more likely to stay engaged when assemblies address immediate practical issues alongside longer-term structural questions.

Real Powers

😊 Assemblies need meaningful responsibility and visible outcomes in order to avoid becoming “talking shops”;

♥ Community-led projects tend to enable residents to solve problems much faster than going through institutions;

☀ Stewardship over budgets creates practical opportunities for residents to exercise democratic power directly;

▼ Shaping policy priorities allows assemblies to influence wider structural decisions while remaining rooted in neighbourhood experience; and

😊 Budget stewardship should include transparent decision records, published spending plans, conflict-of-interest rules, independent audit requirements, and safeguards to prevent the misuse, corruption or discriminatory diversion of public funds.

Independent but Complementary

😊 Assemblies need independence from party-political and institutional control in order to maintain public trust and openness;

♥ At the same time, assemblies are more effective when connected into existing democratic systems rather than operating entirely outside them;

☀ Maintaining both independence and institutional connection helps assemblies balance grassroots legitimacy with practical political impact.

▼ Even where government representatives are not active participants, assemblies offer an opportunity to invite them to witness participatory democracy in action — and to lend their political authority and knowledge to support the process;

- 😊 Government representatives and community collaborators should strive for transparency, open communication, and mutual understanding in their interactions; and
- ♥ They should also work to foster a culture of open collaboration and participant leadership in the assembly, and to balance the power dynamics that naturally exist between people in government and members of the public.



HOW IT COMPARES TO OTHER MODELS

Area Committees

Area committees - also called local or neighbourhood area committees - are local authority sub-committees established to make decisions about a specific area under section 9E of the Local Government Act 2000. They are not new: some councils have had them since the 1990s. Their exact remit and who can attend varies considerably. Sheffield does not invite residents to participate; Durham does. In Bristol, they shape how Community Infrastructure Levy funds are spent; in Surrey, they have no specific remit.

Area committees can improve communication between councils and residents, and may provide more localised spaces for discussion than full council structures. In some cases, they offer greater visibility over local decision-making processes.

However, most area committee models remain fundamentally institution-led. Their powers, agendas, composition, and terms of participation are determined by the local authority itself. Participation is therefore often consultative rather than genuinely power-sharing. And because they are embedded within existing council structures, they tend to reproduce existing political and bureaucratic power dynamics rather than redistribute power more broadly. Residents may be invited to attend and raise issues, but they are rarely supported to become active agents in resolving them.

Community Covenants

Community Covenants - or Civil Society Covenants - are formal power-sharing agreements between councils and community organisations. Covenant partners apply to the local authority to form a covenant, write and agree to a group charter, and can then request for certain decisions to be devolved. They have been implemented in Market Drayton, Wigan, Calderdale, Camden, and Ealing.

Community Covenants move significantly further toward genuine co-governance by formally recognising community organisations as strategic partners. They create more structured pathways for collaboration, negotiation, and devolved decision-making than traditional consultation models.

But covenants contain important limitations. In practice, decisions are made by representatives from local organisations and officers from the local authority - ordinary residents are not included in decision-making in any direct or ongoing sense. The local authority also retains significant power: it co-produces the terms of the covenant and remains involved in co-producing decisions. The assumption of equal partnership between council and community organisations rarely reflects the reality.

Covenants risk becoming partnerships between institutions and organised civil society, rather than mechanisms for mass democratic participation. Their effectiveness also depends heavily on the capacity, legitimacy, and representativeness of participating organisations - which varies significantly between places.

Parish and Local Councils

Communities without a first tier of government can create their own elected Parish Council under Section 11 of the Local Government and Rating Act 1997. Decisions are made by councillors elected every four years and moderated by a clerk.

Local councils do not have statutory responsibilities in the way principal authorities do, but they can exercise the General Power of Competence, enabling them to do anything individuals generally may do, provided it does not conflict with other laws.

Parish councils provide a formally constituted and legally recognised layer of highly local governance. They can exercise important local powers and, in some areas, give communities greater control over local assets, spending, and priorities.

Yet parish councils remain representative rather than participatory democratic institutions. Decision-making power is primarily exercised by elected councillors rather than through ongoing collective deliberation. Elections every four years provide accountability, but not the continuous forms of engagement, relationship-building, and collective action associated with community power. In practice, many parish councils also struggle with low participation, limited diversity, and weak public engagement - governance can become concentrated among relatively small groups of already-active residents.

Comparison Table

Model	Who Decides	Who Organises	Resident Power	Funded By	Continuity of engagement
Area Committees	Local Authority	Local Authority	Consultative Only	Local Authority	Ad Hoc Meetings
Community Covenants	Organisations + LA jointly	Community organisations + LA	Indirect - via civil society	Local authority / grants	Formal partnership; variable
Parish Councils	Elected councillors	Elected councillors + clerk	Periodic elections only	Precept on council tax	Four-yearly elections

Model	Who Decides	Who Organises	Resident Power	Funded By	Continuity of engagement
Neighbourhood Assemblies	Residents directly	Residents + community orgs	Direct and ongoing	National Government	Continuous listening-to-action cycle

Why Neighbourhood Assemblies Go Further

Against the standard set by the Government itself - 'Will it genuinely empower communities?' - Neighbourhood Assemblies go further than any of the other models on the dimension that matters most: genuine community power.

Area Committees keep control within the local authority. Community Covenants shift power toward civil society organisations, but not to residents directly. Parish Councils are elected, but elections alone do not produce the continuous, deliberative, listening-driven engagement through which real community power is built. Only Neighbourhood Assemblies place residents themselves at the centre of listening, priority-setting, decision-making, and action - continuously, not periodically - and vest them with real authority over local budgets and policy priorities.

They also do something that no other model does: they build the democratic culture and civic capacity that makes community power self-sustaining over time.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Favourable Conditions

The likelihood that a Neighbourhood Assembly will take root depends on local conditions. Fertile ground will exist where there is strong local organising capacity, institutional willingness to collaborate, and existing investment opportunities. The key test is not whether conditions are perfect, but whether there is enough trust, capacity, and opportunity to begin.

😊 **Strong pre-existing local organising capacity** is essential. Capacity exists in trusted community organisations, active residents, informal leaders, existing campaigns, community centres, tenants' groups, faith institutions, youth groups, or neighbourhood forums that already bring people together. Assemblies are strongest when they are part of a wider power-building approach that develops community leadership and civic capacity, not just participation exercises.

♥ **Institutional willingness to collaborate** means that there should be people inside institutions willing to share information, invest staff time, respond publicly to community priorities, and test new ways of working. Where institutional support is strong, the task is to build commitments and resources. Where it is weak, the task is to demonstrate proof of concept and build a wider coalition.



 **Investment opportunities** that require meaningful community governance. Pride in Place areas are the clearest example: each receives up to £20 million in funding and support over ten years, with Neighbourhood Boards expected to co-create plans with the wider community. Neighbourhood Assemblies could complement these Boards, providing a regular, open, and deliberative space through which residents shape priorities, scrutinise delivery, and help decide how resources are used. They could also ensure that the skills and democratic habits built during Pride in Place continue beyond the programme as long-term governance infrastructure. Other place-based investment programmes - such as Greater Manchester's Live Well programme, which is investing in community-led neighbourhood support - offer similar openings.

The Trust Barrier

Building mutual trust between government and communities is one of the biggest challenges to successful collaboration between state and civil society. Low public trust in government - with trust in politicians at historic lows - is a major obstacle to institutionalising assemblies. Within government, officials often doubt participatory processes: they worry that forums are dominated by vocal minorities, that most citizens lack the background to weigh trade-offs, or that they already hear public priorities through existing channels (Palmquist, 2025a).

Well-designed assemblies can counter these doubts by involving many directly affected people, surfacing new policy insights, and expanding what is politically possible. Trust-building takes time; evidence from other assemblies helps, but small-scale pilots are frequently the most persuasive way to win government buy-in (Palmquist, 2025a).

The Role of Elected Officials

Local councillors and MPs may perceive Neighbourhood Assemblies as a threat to their representative role. This concern should be taken seriously - and addressed directly.

Elected officials can play a valuable and mutually complementary role working with the Neighbourhood Assembly in their ward or constituency. Roles they might play include (Palmquist, 2025a):

-  Pre-committing to publicly receive and respond to the assembly's recommendations;
-  Opening sessions to endorse and welcome participants;
-  Promoting the assembly to the public and other lawmakers;
-  Observing sessions to learn about process and priorities;
-  Joining discussions as non-voting participants;
-  Serving as full voting participants alongside the public; and
-  Publicly acknowledging the assembly's work, specifying which recommendations will be acted on, and offering reasons for any not pursued.

As an additional mechanism, organisers might consider developing a Community Covenant with elected and non-elected officials to establish effective ways of working - drawing on the model recently developed by the We're Right Here campaign, Local Trust, and Power to Change in Shropshire (see We're Right Here, 2025; Power to Change, 2025).

Funding Model

A central question is whether Neighbourhood Assemblies should be funded by local authorities or National Government.

Local authorities are in some ways the ideal funder - closer to the activity on the ground, better placed to align relevant local budgets with assembly priorities over time.



However, many local budgets are already critically overstressed. If assemblies are funded only through existing local budgets, they risk being perceived as another demand on stretched councils - and, critically, funding risks being absorbed before it reaches community organisers. Conversely, funding only through national grants risks disconnecting assemblies from local delivery systems.

The recommended model combines both: National Government funds the core democratic infrastructure - organising, training, outreach, facilitation, accessibility, and accountability - while local authorities and partners align delivery budgets with assembly priorities, such as neighbourhood improvement funds, community asset stewardship, participatory budgeting pots, or aligned service budgets. In this way, National Government funds the democratic capacity to make assemblies real, while local authorities connect assembly decisions to practical resources for delivery.

Marsh Farm: What an Assembly Costs

The April 2026 pilot was delivered for a total of £12,184 - significantly under the projected £16,050 budget.

Breakdown: Humanity Project contributed £7,500 for outreach and listening work; Marsh Farm Futures contributed £4,593 for event infrastructure including food, marketing, facilitation training, décor, music, and venue; Luton Borough Council contributed £91 for childcare plus in-kind officer time and materials. Marsh Farm Outreach also contributed approximately £1,800 of in-kind management and administration time above funded hours.

This demonstrates that a meaningful, well-run assembly - reaching 194 people through listening and 150 at the event itself - is achievable at modest cost when properly supported.

Financial Accountability

Most community groups will spend public funds wisely and responsibly. But mechanisms must also safeguard against the risks of misuse, poor financial management, or the diversion of resources in ways that disadvantage minorities or less powerful residents. Additional - but not excessive - transparency mechanisms and accounting responsibilities are therefore appropriate.

At minimum, organisations receiving public funds should use transparent budget management platforms that provide detailed transaction logs for projects. Open Collective, for example, supports organisers to accept and disburse funding on a publicly accessible platform that tracks spending. As further funds are released for Neighbourhood Assemblies to steward, additional safeguarding mechanisms should be considered.

Capacity Building

Neighbourhood Assemblies cannot simply be created by mandate; they depend on people having the skills, knowledge and confidence to organise, deliberate and act together. In many places, these capacities are unevenly distributed or have been weakened by years of under-investment in civic infrastructure. If community-led governance is to be real rather than symbolic, capacity building must therefore be treated as a core part of implementation, not an optional add-on.

A national training infrastructure - or network of accredited partners - should be created to develop the skills required to organise and facilitate listening campaigns, assemblies, and action between events at scale. Core skills include listening, facilitation, assembly design, and conflict transformation.

Local organisations could establish ongoing train-the-trainer and leadership development programmes to support residents to become facilitators, organisers, outreach coordinators, and budget stewards. Humanity Project's existing training model - covering facilitation, listening, strategy development, and power analysis - provides a foundation to build on.



Conditions for Participation

Neighbourhood Assemblies should not assume that people can participate simply because a meeting is open to them. Meaningful participation depends on whether residents have the real freedom and opportunity to take part in decisions that affect their lives.

The Democratic Capabilities Framework (INSPIRE, 2026) distinguishes between two kinds of enablers. Downstream enablers can be designed into participation itself: accessible venues, childcare, food, translation, transport support, inclusive facilitation, clear routes to influence, feedback loops, and active outreach. These are essential if assemblies are to include people who are rarely heard.

But participation is also shaped by upstream enablers: the wider social, economic, and political conditions that make it easier or harder for people to take part - income security, housing stability, public safety, labour conditions, access to care and transport, institutional trust, and political culture.

An intersectional approach recognises that these conditions are not experienced equally. Barriers combine across income, race, gender, migration status, disability, age, caring responsibilities, and language.

If Neighbourhood Assemblies are to build genuine community power, they must both design inclusive processes and recognise the wider conditions that shape people's ability to participate. In the near term, organisers will need to develop ways for residents to feed into the decision-making process without attending events in person - hybrid formats and digital agenda-setting platforms are among the options.

Managing Disagreement

Neighbourhood Assemblies should not be designed on the assumption that local communities are naturally harmonious. A well-run assembly acknowledges that residents can bring widely different experiences, interests, and needs into the room. Effective facilitators understand that the standard for deliberative processes is not whether everyone ends up holding the same view, but whether participants have had a fair chance to hear evidence, understand trade-offs, give reasons, listen to one another, and arrive at a decision they can support - or at least live with (Involve, 2025; Bech-Pedersen and Carl, 2025).

Assemblies should be consensus-seeking, but not consensus-dependent: they should aim for common ground where possible, while recognising that compromise, prioritisation, and transparent disagreement are also legitimate democratic outcomes. Organisers should implement design features such as small-group discussion, clear decision rules, accessible evidence, and visible trade-off exercises to help residents move from open disagreement towards workable agreement (KNOCA, 2025).

Where disagreement remains, it should not be hidden or treated as failure. Assemblies should record minority views, unresolved concerns, and reasons for decisions, so that those who disagree can still see how the outcome was reached. This is especially important in neighbourhood governance, where residents have to keep living together after the meeting ends. The aim is not to manufacture unity, but to build enough trust, clarity, and shared responsibility for people to act together while disagreement remains.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act arrives at a moment defined by multiple and compounding crises. The Act offers a genuine opportunity to reshape the relationship between people and the state at neighbourhood level to address societal-wide challenges. But the opportunity will only be seized if the model chosen for neighbourhood governance places residents - not just institutions - at the centre of power.

The evidence is clear: 84% of UK adults feel they have no meaningful control over decisions affecting their neighbourhoods. Trust in politicians is at historic lows. Nearly half the country wants radical change. Against this backdrop, devolving power between institutions - from Whitehall to town halls, from councils to area committees or covenant partners - is not sufficient. It is rearranging the furniture when the house needs rebuilding.

Neighbourhood Assemblies are a proven, practical, and scalable response. They are already working.

- 😊 In Luton, a listening campaign, 150 residents around tables, and a council committed to reinstating a community market.
- ♥ In Islington, Rochdale, Bolton, Prestwich, and across the Humanity Project network, communities are discovering what it feels like when democracy works for them.



The model is evidence-based, developed through practice, and capable of scaling. It builds community power. It is good value for money. It supports the role of elected officials. It doesn't put additional financial pressure on local authorities. It invites communities to determine their own development and it is capable of directing the knowledge and assets of the whole of society to address the immense challenges we face as a society.

The question for Government, MPs, and local authorities is not whether this works. It is whether they are willing to back it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Government, MPs and local authorities should act now to make Neighbourhood Assemblies the preferred model for community empowerment under the Act. Specifically, we recommend:

♥ **Endorse Neighbourhood Assemblies in forthcoming regulations.** The Secretary of State should explicitly identify Neighbourhood Assemblies within the forthcoming regulations on neighbourhood governance arrangements, establishing them as a recognised route for local authorities to meet their duties under the Act.

☀ **Issue supplementary guidance to Pride in Place Neighbourhood Boards.** MHCLG should update Pride in Place guidance, or issue a supplementary guidance note through the Communities Delivery Unit, explaining how Neighbourhood Boards can use Neighbourhood Assemblies to support community engagement, priority-setting, scrutiny and delivery

▼ **Apply a community-power test to neighbourhood governance.** Regulations and guidance should assess neighbourhood governance arrangements against a clear test: do residents directly shape agendas, priorities, decisions, resources and follow-up action? This would distinguish genuine community-led governance from weaker models that only consult residents, appoint selected representatives, or create partnerships between institutions without shifting power to the wider community.

😊 **Fund Neighbourhood Assemblies as democratic infrastructure.** National Government should provide dedicated funding for organising, listening, facilitation, training, accessibility, communications, evaluation and accountability, so assemblies are not dependent on already-stretched local authority budgets.

♥ **Give assemblies real powers over budgets, assets and priorities.** **Neighbourhood Assemblies should be given a clear remit over** specific local budgets, assets or policy areas, such as participatory budgeting pots, neighbourhood improvement funds, community asset stewardship or local service priorities. Where an assembly agrees a proposal that requires action by a council, MP, public body or service provider, that institution should be required to publish a formal response within a set timeframe, explaining what action will be taken, what resources or powers will be used, and why any recommendation cannot be implemented.

☀ **Develop a national training infrastructure.** Government should support a national training infrastructure, delivered through trusted local and national partners, to develop staff from community organisations and residents as organisers, facilitators, outreach coordinators and budget stewards.

▼ **Define the role of elected representatives in assembly guidance.** MHCLG should clarify the role of MPs and councillors in Neighbourhood Assemblies through forthcoming neighbourhood governance regulations and associated guidance. This should set out that elected representatives can convene, endorse, promote, observe, listen, respond to recommendations and help unlock institutional resources. It should also make clear that they should not control the agenda, chair resident deliberations, dominate decision-making, or override the resident-led character of the assembly except through clearly defined statutory responsibilities.

😊 **Pilot, evaluate and scale nationally.** Government should support a programme of Neighbourhood Assembly pilots across varied places, including Pride in Place areas, urban estates, rural communities and areas with weaker civic infrastructure. Pilots should evaluate impact on participation, trust, resident leadership, local outcomes, institutional responsiveness and value for money. Learning should inform future national guidance, funding design and wider rollout.

“If the aim is genuine community empowerment, communities need more than new committees, consultations or institutional partnerships. They need spaces where residents can listen to one another, make decisions together, steward resources, act on shared priorities, and become powerful together.”

Glenn Jenkins, Marsh Farm Peoples Assembly

The Act has created the legal mandate. The evidence base exists. The practice is already working on the ground. What is needed now is political will - and the confidence to back communities to lead.

Next Steps

While the recommendations in this report are aimed primarily at national policymakers, a range of actors can begin to initiate the formation of a Neighbourhood Assembly in their area and lobby National Government to implement the recommendations of this report.

😊 **Community organisations:** Identify local partners, begin listening to residents, and convene a small working group to explore a Neighbourhood Assembly pilot. Use early learning to lobby MPs, councillors and National Government for funding, recognition and support.

💖 **Local authorities:** Identify wards where there is strong community organising capacity and work with trusted local organisations to pilot Neighbourhood Assemblies. Commit staff time, share relevant data and budgets, and publish formal responses to assembly priorities.

☀️ **MPs:** Champion Neighbourhood Assemblies locally and nationally by convening partners, endorsing pilots and raising the model with ministers. Press Government to recognise assemblies in forthcoming regulations and fund them as democratic infrastructure.

▼ **Funders:** Support early-stage pilots by funding listening campaigns, facilitation, accessibility, evaluation and resident leadership development. Use evidence from funded pilots to build the case for long-term public investment.

😊 **Contact:** info@humanityproject.uk for support with any of the above actions

Where to go for more information

For readers who want to explore the model in more detail, the following resources provide practical guidance, real-world examples and wider evidence on assemblies and community-government collaboration:

😊 **Guide to Popular Assemblies** - a practical introduction to designing and running assemblies.

♥ **Marsh Farm People's Assembly Final Report** - a real-world example of a Neighbourhood Assembly in practice.

☀ **Assemblies as a Tool for a Just Democracy Report** - a report from Partners for Dignity & Rights classifying assembly models, discussing their potential and limitations, and explaining how co-governing assemblies can strengthen impact and durability over time.

▼ **Assemblies Case Studies** - case studies from Partners for Dignity & Rights showing co-governing assemblies in practice across different contexts.

😊 **Initiating Community-Government Collaboration** - a practical guide from Partners for Dignity & Rights on building relationships and collaboration between community organisations and public bodies.

♥ To receive the full set of resources, email: lachlan.ayles@corganisers.org.uk

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Organisations:

Community Organisers, Humanity Project, Operation Black Vote, Together Creating Communities (Wrexham), Marsh Farm Outreach, Octopus Communities, Haringey Community Food Network, Wigan & Leigh Community Charity, Prestwich Village Neighbourhood Forum, Oswestry Climate Action Hub, Exeter Community Assembly



Everyone has the right to be listened to

Neighbourhood Assemblies create the conditions for people from different backgrounds, experiences and viewpoints to understand one another and work together.

In an age of polarisation, finding ways to act together across difference matters more than ever.

