



Whose neighbourhood?

A study of early challenges and opportunities in delivering transformation through Pride in Place



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POTENTIAL**

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Katharine Willis and Kasper de Graaf



UNIVERSITY OF
PLYMOUTH

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FOREWORD



Whose neighbourhood? That question goes to the heart of one of the central challenges in public policy today.

For more than four decades, governments of different hues have sought to improve the fortunes of declining places through successive policy interventions. Each contributed valuable lessons, but one insight is left standing with increasing clarity: durable positive transformation can't be delivered *to* places, it must be done *with* them.

The government's Pride in Place programme takes the next step in that evolution. Its significance lies not just in the scale and length of its investment, but in the ambition to place neighbourhoods at the centre of decision-making. If that's achieved, Pride in Place could usher in a transformational model of community-led renewal.

The people who know a neighbourhood

best are those who live there, and their knowledge, relationships, aspirations and lived experience are key to shaping its future. Building the capacity and confidence to exercise that agency takes time and sustained commitment. But empowerment does not mean isolation. Neighbourhoods are connected to one another and to the wider places, economies and systems of which they form part. Effective co-design therefore combines community knowledge and agency with access to wider perspectives, evidence and expertise. Local authorities, Members of Parliament, universities, businesses and professional partners have an important role—not in prescribing outcomes, but in enabling communities to connect with those wider relationships, make informed choices, build partnerships and learn from others.

Recognising both the scale of this opportunity and the challenges inherent

in delivering it, Key Cities commissioned this study at an early stage of the programme. Its purpose is not to pass judgment, but to identify emerging gaps, challenges and opportunities while there is still time for learning to strengthen delivery. Its recommendations are intended as practical contributions to improving outcomes through knowledge sharing, capacity building and the spread of effective practice—not only within our Key Cities, but in Pride in Place neighbourhoods across the country.

The report reflects the strength of Key Cities in contributing to effective policy development for our places. It's been developed through collaboration between our Key Cities, the parliamentary members of the Key Cities APPG, and the Key Cities Innovation Network of civic universities, working alongside practitioners and national stakeholders: a wide range of knowledge and expertise brought together in ways that strengthen rather than dilute community agency.

Universities can make a particularly valuable contribution as civic partners, helping neighbourhoods build capability, understand evidence, undertake participatory research and evaluation, and connect local experience with learning elsewhere. Alongside the com-

plementary roles of local government, Members of Parliament, business and other civic and professional partners, this creates the potential for learning to flow between neighbourhoods and places and between local experience and national policy throughout the life of the programme.

Pride in Place will ultimately be judged not by the projects it delivers or the investment it makes, but by whether communities emerge stronger, more confident, more connected and better able to shape their own futures.

We offer this report and its recommendations in that spirit: to support government's ambitions, strengthen delivery on the ground, and help ensure that learning from neighbourhoods continues to improve Pride in Place and inform the future of place policy across the country.

Cllr Vince Maple

Leader of Medway Council and Chair of Key Cities

Rebecca Long-Bailey MP

Member of Parliament for Salford and Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Key Cities

Professor Nic Beech

Vice-Chancellor of the University of Salford and Chair of the Key Cities Innovation Network

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pride in Place represents a significant shift in neighbourhood policy. Its ten-year funding horizon, non-competitive allocation and commitment to community-led decision-making create an opportunity to move beyond short-term regeneration projects towards sustained neighbourhood transformation. The central question is whether the programme can translate the devolution of funding into the devolution of power.

This study examines that question at an unusually early point in implementation. It draws on seven Pride in Place neighbourhoods in different parts of the country, alongside reviews of policy and academic evidence and subsequent consultation with parliamentarians, local authorities, universities and MHCLG. The research was undertaken while most of the neighbourhoods were still establishing governance arrangements, and therefore examines the conditions being created for community-led delivery rather than attempting to assess outcomes. It does not claim to represent resident perspectives; engaging residents, community organisations and emerging neighbourhood boards should be an important next stage of research.

The findings are encouraging but challenging. Across very different places there

was strong support for the principles of Pride in Place and considerable personal commitment among those responsible for establishing it. The ten-year horizon was particularly welcomed. But implementation also exposes a gap between programme ambition and delivery capability. Community empowerment, co-design and resident control are widely supported in principle; the practical structures, skills and methodologies needed to make them real are much less consistently developed.

From consultation to co-design

The most immediate challenge is to turn community engagement into meaningful shared decision-making. The study found considerable variation in what local partners understood by co-design. In some places engagement was moving towards genuine participation; elsewhere it remained closer to conventional consultation. Pride in Place provides an opportunity to develop much stronger practice: involving residents in framing problems, considering evidence and options, making choices and reviewing their consequences, rather than simply asking communities what they want.

This requires practical support. Neighbourhood boards will need access to facilitation, community-research methods, inclusive engagement techniques, option appraisal and other tools that enable people with different backgrounds and levels of confidence to participate effectively. The objective should not be to prescribe a sin-

gle national methodology, but to ensure that every neighbourhood has the capability to move beyond consultation towards genuine co-design.

Build on the community capacity that already exists

Creating a neighbourhood board does not in itself create community power. Many neighbourhoods already contain voluntary and community organisations, informal networks, trusted leaders, community spaces and partnerships that hold considerable local knowledge and social capital. The research identified a risk that, in seeking new forms of resident representation, programmes can inadvertently bypass this existing civic infrastructure.

Neighbourhoods should therefore begin by understanding the assets, organisations and relationships already present and build from them. Government, councils and boards should ensure that procurement and partnership arrangements enable grassroots organisations to participate rather than unintentionally exclude them.

Community power requires enabling institutions

Giving residents greater control does not mean withdrawing the state or professional expertise. Local authorities remain accountable bodies and possess financial, legal, procurement and delivery capabilities that communities need. The challenge is for their role progressively to de-

velop from control towards enablement as neighbourhood capability grows. MPs face a comparable transition: from helping establish the programme towards convening, championing neighbourhood interests and removing barriers while allowing communities themselves to determine priorities.

Capacity-building must therefore work in both directions. Residents and board members need support to exercise new responsibilities, but councils, MPs and other institutions may also need help with co-design, facilitation and the practical implications of sharing and relinquishing power. The programme will succeed where institutions provide communities with expertise and connections without substituting institutional priorities for community agency.

Invest for ten years, not one project at a time

Visible improvements to streets, parks, buildings and public spaces matter. They can demonstrate progress, rebuild confidence and provide an early signal that previously neglected places are valued. But physical renewal alone will not create stronger communities. The strongest approaches connect investment in places and assets with the organisations, activities and relationships that enable people to use and sustain them.

The ten-year horizon makes it possible to think differently about stewardship. Pride in Place Plans should consider from the



outset who will own, manage, maintain and animate investments after they have been delivered. Community ownership, Community Interest Companies (CICs), community land trusts, asset transfer and income-generating models may all have a role, depending on local circumstances. Government should also keep funding arrangements under review where annual allocations or the capital/revenue balance inhibit well-founded strategic investment.

Turn hundreds of local experiments into a national learning programme

Pride in Place neighbourhoods differ profoundly, and local flexibility is one of the programme's strengths. But localism should not mean that hundreds of communities independently have to solve the same problems around governance, engagement, procurement, data and delivery.

The emerging Network for Neighbourhoods should become the principal infrastructure for practical learning across the programme. Alongside peer networks, training, mentoring and specialist expertise, it should provide an accessible operating library of usable resources: governance models, role descriptions, co-design approaches, option-appraisal and decision-making tools, procurement guidance and examples from practice. Learning

Bilston Town Hall is situated in the Bilston Pride in Place neighbourhood in Key City Wolverhampton.

should connect places facing similar challenges—not simply those that happen to be geographically close—and should continually feed emerging experience back into programme delivery.

Measure neighbourhood transformation, not simply programme activity

A ten-year programme also requires a ten-year learning infrastructure. At present, neighbourhood baseline and evaluation capability is uneven. Measuring expenditure, completed projects or movement in broad statistical indicators will not adequately reveal whether neighbourhoods are becoming stronger or whether residents have gained greater agency.

A proportionate longitudinal framework should therefore be established early, combining common quantitative evidence with qualitative and community-generated evidence. It should be capable of understanding changes in trust, agency, belonging, social infrastructure and lived experience alongside physical, economic and service outcomes, while allowing neighbourhoods to define what matters locally.

Universities offer an underused resource in achieving this. Their potential contribution extends well beyond retrospective evaluation. Depending on local circumstances, universities can support baseline development, data interpretation, participatory research, community-researcher training, evaluation design, facilitation and specialist advice, as well as connect

learning between neighbourhoods and national policy. The limited university consultation undertaken for this study suggests that much of this capability already exists but is not yet systematically connected to the programme.

What needs to happen now

The report makes six practical recommendations:

1. Invest in the practice and methodology of co-design, giving neighbourhoods the capability to move from consultation to meaningful shared decision-making.
2. Build from existing community capacity rather than around it, recognising trusted grassroots organisations, networks and social infrastructure.
3. Support the evolving roles of local authorities and MPs, enabling them progressively to move from establishing and administering the programme towards enabling community control.
4. Plan for long-term stewardship, not only project delivery, connecting capital investment with sustainable community institutions, activity and ownership.
5. Use the Network for Neighbourhoods to build shared learning and practical support, so that local autonomy benefits from rather than excludes learning across the national

programme.

6. Measure what matters and mobilise universities as civic partners, establishing proportionate baselines and longitudinal learning that combine quantitative, qualitative and community-generated evidence.

These recommendations are not an argument for greater prescription. Neighbourhoods start from very different positions, and Pride in Place should retain the flexibility that allows communities to develop approaches appropriate to their circumstances. The priority is instead to provide the capability, relationships and learning infrastructure that make genuine local autonomy possible.

Pride in Place is consequently about more than £20 million investments or individual regeneration projects. It is a test of whether government, councils, elected representatives and civic institutions can create the conditions in which communities themselves acquire greater capacity to shape the places in which they live. Devolving money is comparatively straightforward; devolving power is harder. The opportunity of the next ten years is to do both.

Pride in Place

The programme

PRIDE IN PLACE

The Pride in Place Programme is the UK Government's flagship communities programme, providing 284 neighbourhoods across the United Kingdom with up to £20 million each in funding and support over ten years.

Alongside it, the Pride in Place Impact Fund provides shorter-term capital investment of £1.5 million over two years to 95 places across England, Scotland and Wales. Together, the programmes combine long-term neighbourhood renewal with more immediate investment in improving high streets and places and spaces of community value.

Pride in Place is an uncompleted programme targeted principally at disadvantaged communities. Its central premise is that local people should have greater power to shape the future of their neighbourhoods and determine how investment is used. Long-term funding is therefore combined with new forms of community governance, capacity building and a high degree of flexibility over local priorities.

The programme has three overarching objectives:

1. Stronger communities: rebuilding relationships, trust, belonging and community cohesion;
2. Thriving places: improving neighbourhoods, public spaces and services to better meet local needs; and

3. Taking back control: giving people greater influence over the future of their communities and the decisions that affect them.

These objectives are underpinned by four guiding principles: that the programme should be community-led, flexible, long-term and supportive. Neighbourhood boards made up of local people are intended to lead decision-making, supported by local authorities and MPs, while government provides capacity funding and wider support to enable communities to develop the skills and capability required to take a progressively greater role in delivery.

Each neighbourhood board is required to co-create a ten-year Pride in Place Plan with its wider community, setting out a long-term vision for the neighbourhood and a pathway for delivery. MHCLG requires evidence of broad and sustained community engagement, including the involvement of people who may previously have been excluded from local decision-making.

MHCLG subsequently issued detailed guidance for Phase 2 neighbourhoods on preparing the ten-year vision, requiring boards to set out their long-term vision, local context and evidence, community engagement and learning, priorities for change, partnership arrangements, governance and plans for continuous community involvement and adaptation over the life of the programme (MHCLG, 2026c).

Boards have considerable flexibility over



The Matson housing estate is in Key City Gloucester's Matson & Robinswood Pride in Place neighbourhood. Photo © Stephen Dorey.

what they invest in. Potential interventions span regeneration, high streets and heritage; housing; work, productivity and skills; community cohesion; health and wellbeing; transport; safety and security; and education and opportunity. The indicative interventions set out by government are not exhaustive, and boards may propose other activities where community engagement demonstrates that these better meet local needs. The programme consequently recognises that neighbourhood renewal can involve both physical investment and the development of the social relationships, institutions and capabilities required to sustain community-led change.

The ten-year horizon is intended to allow this capacity to develop over time rather than treating neighbourhood renewal as a succession of individual projects. Government expects Pride in Place areas to transition towards a community-led model of delivery by year three, although the form and pathway will vary according to local circumstances. This could involve an established community organisation acting as an anchor institution or a neighbourhood board itself developing into an independent community-led organisation.

Timeline

The programme has evolved through several stages.

In October 2023, the then Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) announced the Long-Term Plan

for Towns, initially identifying 55 towns to receive long-term investment intended to support locally determined priorities, and announcing a further 20 in March 2024.

Following the general election in July 2024, the new government reformed the scheme as the Plan for Neighbourhoods and confirmed funding for each of these 75 places, which we now refer to as Phase 1, of up to £20 million over ten years.

On 25 September 2025, the Plan for Neighbourhoods was renamed the Pride in Place Programme and substantially expanded through the addition of 169 Phase 2 neighbourhoods. These were deliberately defined at a more hyperlocal scale, typically covering populations of around 10,000, with selection focused on neighbourhoods experiencing both high levels of deprivation and weak social infrastructure.

The scale and duration of the programme are significant, but any targeted place-based intervention inevitably raises questions about those areas that fall outside its boundaries. Pride in Place selection has sought to balance need with geographic spread, including through a cap of one funded neighbourhood per parliamentary constituency. While understandable as a means of distributing investment more widely, this can exclude adjacent neighbourhoods experiencing comparable or even greater levels of disadvantage. Key Cities members have highlighted examples including Little Hulton North in Salford, ranked highly for need but not

selected, and Hull, where several neighbourhoods within the highest-need cohort were excluded. The programme therefore illustrates a recurring challenge in place-based policy: how to target finite resources sufficiently to achieve meaningful impact while avoiding hard boundaries that separate communities facing very similar circumstances.

In February 2026, the Government announced that a further 40 neighbourhoods would join Pride in Place, bringing the total programme footprint to 284 neighbourhoods, with the additional neighbourhoods identified in March 2026.

Alongside the main ten-year programme, the Pride in Place Impact Fund provides £1.5 million over 2025/26 and 2026/27 to 95 places across England, Scotland and Wales for more immediate, visible improvements to high streets and community spaces.

For the 169 Phase 2 neighbourhoods, the initial implementation timetable includes:

September 2025: Phase 2 neighbourhoods announced;

17 July 2026: neighbourhood boards to confirm final membership and any proposed changes to their default neighbourhood boundaries;

November 2026: neighbourhood boards to submit their Pride in Place Plans to MHCLG for assessment and approval.

Governance and community leadership

The neighbourhood board sits at the centre of the Pride in Place model. Its purpose is to give local people meaningful decision-making power over the future of their neighbourhood and the use of programme funding.

Each board is led by an independent Chair, appointed and approved jointly by the local MP and local authority. The Chair leads the recruitment and convening of the board, supported by the MP and local authority. Boards must include the relevant MP and at least one ward councillor, alongside residents and people with strong connections to the neighbourhood. Membership can include community leaders and activists, local businesses and social enterprises, cultural and heritage organisations, and public agencies and anchor institutions, including further and higher education institutions. The composition must ensure that residents and people who live or work within the area outnumber elected representatives.

Once established, the board is responsible for working with the wider community to co-create the Pride in Place Plan and for demonstrating that priorities and spending decisions genuinely reflect community views. MHCLG places particular emphasis on extensive and continuing engagement rather than a one-off consultation exercise, with communities expected to remain involved throughout the programme.

The local authority initially acts as the accountable body, with responsibility for financial administration and formal monitoring alongside its wider enabling and supporting role. Government nevertheless envisages a progressive shift towards community-led delivery. By year three, areas are expected to be moving towards arrangements in which delivery is increasingly led by community institutions and partnerships, with the appropriate model determined locally.

The programme combines this local autonomy with a deliberately light-touch national monitoring framework. Local authorities currently submit monitoring returns on behalf of the programme, signed off by their neighbourhood boards, covering expenditure, activity, planned and delivered projects and selected outputs. MHCLG states that this is intended to provide sufficient information to understand progress and value for money while placing as little administrative burden on places as possible (MHCLG, 2026a).

Capacity building is therefore integral rather than incidental to the programme model. Government has established a Communities Delivery Unit within MHCLG to provide direct support, including a designated official for each neighbourhood, and plans a Network for Neighbourhoods to connect boards with community-sector expertise, technical advice, training, mentoring and shared learning. Boards are also encouraged to develop partnerships with community organisations, business-

es, anchor institutions, philanthropists and other funders to strengthen local capability and attract additional resources over the longer term.

Key Cities and Pride in Place

Of the approximately 284 neighbourhoods funded through the main Pride in Place Programme, 45 (16%) are located within Key Cities local authority areas (see Appendix 1). In addition, 11 of the 95 local authorities receiving support through the Pride in Place Impact Fund are Key Cities, representing up to £916.5 million in government funding and support across the network.

As the UK's largest and most diverse network of urban areas outside the capital, representing communities in inner-city, suburban, peri-urban and coastal areas across the country, Key Cities therefore has a significant stake in the programme and a breadth of experience relevant to its successful delivery.

The neighbourhoods examined in this study are all located within Key Cities, but were selected to reflect, as far as possible, the diversity of circumstances and experiences across the wider Pride in Place cohort. The purpose of the study is consequently not simply to examine implementation within Key Cities, but to identify emerging challenges, opportunities and lessons that can help strengthen delivery and outcomes for Pride in Place neighbourhoods across the country.

The context

Policy and literature review

THE EVOLUTION OF PLACE IN PUBLIC POLICY

The Pride in Place programme was not born in a vacuum. It sits at the end of a long line of interventions by central government to address long-term decline in places up and down the land. Can it also become a mechanism for supporting a new approach to place, characterised by local agency?

Over the past four decades, place has become increasingly visible in policy narratives across the United Kingdom. Governments of different colours have sought to tackle inequalities through programmes of urban regeneration, neighbourhood renewal, regional development, devolution and place-focused investment. While these interventions have varied in aims, methods and political philosophy, they have shared a recognition that geography matters: where people live shapes their opportunities, health, prosperity, wellbeing and life chances (Barca, 2009; Marmot et al., 2010; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

The persistence of place-based inequalities in the face of centrally devised programmes has ensured that policy has continued to evolve. The economic restructuring of the 1980s, widening regional productivity gaps, the decline of industrial and coastal communities, changing employment patterns, demographic change, pressure on public services, climate threats and growing concern over social cohesion have

prompted governments to reconsider both the causes of spatial disadvantage and their policy responses. As understanding of the challenges has developed, so too has the conception of what can be done to tackle them (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities [DLUHC], 2022; Tallon, 2020).

Successive governments have often approached place from opposing perspectives, from market-led regeneration and competitive bidding to social welfare and inclusive growth. At key moments, opposing philosophies have converged to produce significant institutional innovation, as illustrated by the partnership between a Conservative Chancellor and Labour Manchester to drive through city-region devolution in England (HM Government & Greater Manchester Combined Authority [GMCA], 2014).

Place policy in the United Kingdom over this period is best understood as an iterative process. While short-termism and changes of political direction have caused significant challenges, successive interventions have nevertheless progressively broadened understanding of the economic, social, institutional and democratic dimensions of place. Each generation of policy responded to perceived limitations in its predecessors, while posing new questions for subsequent initiatives to address. Governments have iteratively sought to address how declining places can be regenerated; how places contribute to national prosperity; how communities can participate in

shaping their futures; and how deprived neighbourhoods can be transformed to flourish sustainably.

While many of the policy developments discussed here relate primarily to England, place-based policy has also been shaped by devolution to the home nations. Wales, in particular, has pursued its own distinctive approach, embedding place within broader frameworks of sustainable development, community wellbeing and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. The Act requires specified public bodies to pursue social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing through long-term thinking, prevention, integration, collaboration and involvement (Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015; Welsh Government, 2015). Despite these institutional differences, many of the underlying challenges of neighbourhood decline, spatial inequality and community participation are shared across the nations of the United Kingdom.

Regenerating declining places

Place policy in England has evolved in response to the profound economic and social restructuring of the 1980s. The rapid contraction of manufacturing, the decline of ports, the closure of coal mines and their supply chains left many towns and cities facing unprecedented economic and physical decline. The industrial devastation exacerbated a decline in coastal destinations that had started even earlier, with the advent of mass air travel in the 1960s, com-

pounded by defence restructuring, decline in the fishing industry and the impact of containerisation on employment in port cities (Tallon, 2020).

Large areas of formerly productive land became derelict, unemployment rose sharply and private investment retreated. Many urban neighbourhoods experienced an exodus of local people alongside deteriorating housing and public infrastructure.

The scale of these challenges required a significant policy response. While earlier governments had intervened in urban renewal, the regeneration programmes associated with Michael Heseltine in the 1980s—with Urban Development Corporations, Enterprise Zones, City Grant and other initiatives—represented a marked shift in both ambition and delivery. Rather than focusing primarily on housing improvement or municipal redevelopment, policy was aimed at providing incentives to stimulate private investment, unlock development opportunities and restore economic confidence in some of the major places experiencing structural decline (Local Government, Planning and Land Act 1980; Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government [MHCLG], 2019a; Tallon, 2020).

These interventions achieved notable success in Liverpool and London's Docklands, and similar approaches were applied—with varying degrees of success—in a number of other cities. Urban Development Corporations demonstrated the ca-

“It became clear that built-world regeneration alone was insufficient to address the challenges... success in a place depended also on the wellbeing of its communities.”

capacity of concentrated public powers and investment to assemble land, provide infrastructure and stimulate large-scale redevelopment, but also attracted criticism for centralised governance and limited local democratic accountability (Imrie & Thomas, 1999; Tallon, 2020).

It became clear, however, that built-world regeneration alone was insufficient to address the wider challenges facing disadvantaged communities—and many of them, in any case, were far removed from the action. New commercial developments did not necessarily translate into improved opportunities for local people, while economic growth often sat cheek-by-jowl alongside persistent unemployment, poor health outcomes, low educational attainment and social exclusion. Regeneration might change the look of a place and even work for investors, but did not necessarily

transform the prospects of local people. There was a growing awareness that success in a place depended also on the social and economic wellbeing of its communities (Tallon, 2020; Urban Task Force, 1999).

Recent analysis by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation adds a further dimension to this debate by considering socio-economic deprivation alongside the strength of local social infrastructure. Hunter and Ibbison (2026) identify a substantial number of “doubly disadvantaged” neighbourhoods experiencing both high deprivation and weak social infrastructure, only some of which receive Pride in Place investment. Their analysis also suggests that many Phase 2 Pride in Place neighbourhoods begin the programme with particularly weak levels of community participation and social infrastructure. This highlights an important implementation challenge: some of

the neighbourhoods most in need of long-term investment may also have the least developed civic infrastructure through which community-led governance and delivery can initially be organised.

Neighbourhoods and communities

By the early 1990s, it was clear that economic inactivity, inequalities, crime and social exclusion remained concentrated within deprived neighbourhoods even where substantial physical transformation was taking place around them.

A growing body of research and policy evaluation showed that deprivation was multidimensional and spatially concentrated. Neighbourhood disadvantage was increasingly understood as the product of interacting economic, social and environmental factors requiring integrated responses. This marked an important shift in policy thinking to combine regeneration and investment with improving outcomes for people and communities (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998, 2001).

This broader understanding found expression in the next regeneration programmes in the 1990s, when Michael Heseltine's City Challenge offered funding for local authorities to develop more holistic regeneration strategies in partnership with business and voluntary organisations. While competition for such funding remained a defining characteristic—necessarily leaving many of the most challenged places unfunded—successful bids did in-

creasingly combine physical regeneration with interventions around employment, education, housing, community safety and environmental improvement. The Single Regeneration Budget, introduced in 1994, combined funding streams to enable local partnerships to tackle issues in their area. Partnership became an increasingly prominent feature, convening local authorities, businesses, voluntary organisations, educational institutions and community representatives in shared regeneration frameworks (Tallon, 2020).

The Blair government elected in 1997 broadened the policy approach, prioritising social exclusion and introducing a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. Government increasingly recognised that disadvantage was concentrated geographically and that improving outcomes required coordinated action across multiple public services at all levels (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998, 2001).

While approaches to community participation varied considerably—and generally involved consultation rather than empowerment—the principle that local people had a role in informing regeneration policy started to become more widely accepted.

The underlying trend was reinforced by independent reviews such as Richard Rogers' Urban Task Force, which advocated a vision of urban renaissance combining design quality, environmental sustainability, economic vitality and social wellbeing (Urban Task Force, 1999). Academic

research and programme evaluation similarly pointed towards the importance of integrated, long-term approaches capable of addressing both the physical and social dimensions of neighbourhood change.

This period confirmed the shift in how government understood place. Regeneration was about people as well as property, neighbourhoods as well as infrastructure, and partnerships as well as projects. But regeneration was still driven from the centre and little attention had yet been given to new governance models for achieving meaningful collaboration between communities, public institutions and other partners so that places could shape their own futures.

Cities driving regional growth

In the early 2000s, thinking about urban competitiveness was increasingly influenced by Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class*, with growing emphasis on talent, creativity, amenities and the knowledge economy (Florida, 2002). In the following decade, the related concept of innovation districts further emphasised the potential of dense concentrations of businesses, research institutions, entrepreneurs and infrastructure to drive urban growth (Katz & Wagner, 2014). These approaches were also contested, particularly where the pursuit of mobile talent and investment appeared to displace attention from existing communities or deepen inequalities within otherwise successful cities (Peck, 2005).

Policymakers, increasingly concerned about productivity gaps, regional inequalities and weak growth, began to focus on the economic potential of functional urban areas outside the capital.

Research highlighted the importance of agglomeration economies, demonstrating how concentrations of people, businesses, knowledge institutions and infrastructure could boost productivity, innovation and jobs. The success of major cities elsewhere demonstrated the importance of city-regions in a global economy characterised by knowledge-intensive industries, advanced services and innovation-led growth (Manchester Independent Economic Review [MIER], 2009).

Successive governments increasingly saw that cities as networks could play a central role in improving national economic performance. In the Blair years, John Prescott's Regional Development Agencies focused on stimulating regional economies and began to recognise the contribution of major urban centres as drivers of wider regional growth (Regional Development Agencies Act 1998).

This trend accelerated following the 2008 financial crash. The need to stimulate recovery coincided with renewed concern over longstanding regional disparities and the concentration of economic growth within London and the South East. Against this backdrop, Conservative Chancellor George Osborne placed cities at the centre of his strategy for rebalancing the national

economy during the Coalition government. The publication of *Unlocking Growth in Cities* in 2011 and the introduction of City Deals represented a turning point in English place policy, albeit focused initially on the major metropolitan centres: city devolution (Cabinet Office, 2011, 2012).

This development was not only centrally dictated. The case for city devolution was significantly informed by the Manchester Independent Economic Review, which provided an empirical foundation, conceptual framework and strategic justification for Greater Manchester's push for local autonomy. Published in 2009, MIER demonstrated that Greater Manchester functioned as an interconnected economic area and provided an influential evidence base for the city-region's subsequent case for stronger governance, devolved powers and the creation of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (MIER, 2009).

Recognising that cities have different economic structures, governance and priorities, City Deals sought to negotiate bespoke agreements reflecting the strengths and opportunities of individual places. This built on a Europe-wide trend towards smart specialisation and led to the introduction of Growth Deals, Devolution Deals, Metro Mayors and Combined Authorities more widely, gradually devolving responsibility in areas such as transport, skills, housing and planning to local institutions (Cabinet Office, 2011, 2012; *Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016*; European Commission, 2012).

The devolution agenda was underpinned by a belief that local leaders and stakeholders were better placed than central government to shape strategies reflecting local economic opportunities. Universities increasingly came to be recognised not simply as providers of education but as anchor institutions contributing to innovation, skills, research, business growth and civic leadership. Collaboration between local government, higher education, business and the voluntary sector became an increasingly prominent feature of local economic development, laying the foundations for what would come to be developed as civic partnership (UPP Foundation Civic University Commission, 2019).

At the same time, the uneven distribution of the benefits associated with creative-city and innovation-led development became increasingly apparent, with disparities frequently growing rather than narrowing, leading back to the question of how economic success at the metropolitan scale could become inclusive growth at the community scale (Peck, 2005; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). This did not invalidate the city-regional approach; rather, it highlighted a critical relationship between economic competitiveness, inclusive growth and neighbourhood wellbeing. Mayors Sadiq Khan in London and Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester championed “good growth” in the late 2010s to connect city-regional economic strategy with neighbourhood-level regeneration, social inclusion and community development

(Greater London Authority, 2017; GMCA, 2017).

The focus of place policy increasingly turned towards the lived experience of communities, central to initiatives including Levelling Up and Pride in Place, which emphasised the quality of places, the participation of communities and the distribution of opportunity within neighbourhoods (DLUHC, 2022a; MHCLG, 2026b).

Participation and community agency

In parallel, governments over the period increasingly recognised that successful policy required local people to be actively involved and communities to have capacity to influence decisions that affect their neighbourhoods.

Driven partly by technological advances and rising expectations about user engagement, this reflected a changing relationship between government and citizens mirroring that between producers and consumers. Where previously communities were consultees, there was a growing awareness that local knowledge, community networks and civic participation could help to produce more effective and sustainable outcomes.

In the New Labour period, the New Deal for Communities sought to place resident engagement at the heart of neighbourhood renewal. Local Strategic Partnerships tried to develop more coordinated approaches to local priorities which, with varied outcomes, nevertheless inched fur-

ther towards collaborative governance. The national evaluation of New Deal for Communities found substantial improvements across many of the participating neighbourhoods, while also demonstrating how difficult it was to attribute change, close persistent gaps and sustain community participation over the long term (Department for Communities and Local Government [DCLG], 2010).

Tip O'Neill's dictum "All politics is local" is widely accepted as a truism, but in Britain, embedding it in government thinking was always a challenge. The United Kingdom remains one of the most highly centralised of all Western democracies—particularly in England, where the vast majority of political decision-making, taxation and spending has remained concentrated in Whitehall. Its system of subnational government is marked by an unusually high degree of fiscal centralisation and limited local control over resources and economic policy compared with many other developed countries (Breach & Bridgett, 2022).

The Coalition government that took office in 2010 sought to promote localism with new powers for communities, including neighbourhood planning, community rights relating to local assets and opportunities for greater civic participation (Localism Act 2011). Although this approach attracted broad support across the political spectrum, implementing it while local government funding was drastically cut under the austerity programme was a major challenge when community capacity var-

ied significantly. In practice, opportunities for participation were generally strongest where communities already possessed relatively high levels of social capital, organisational capacity and civic leadership, while more disadvantaged neighbourhoods became even more detached from opportunity (Breach & Bridgett, 2022; National Audit Office, 2014).

festival in October 2016, shortly after he had announced his intention to stand in the election to become the first Mayor of Greater Manchester the following May:

“I’ve talked for many years about the deep alienation in former industrial communities. The London perspective has shaped national policy for decades. The interests of those places didn’t shape it.

“Devolution was not conceived as the answer to the referendum, but we must embrace it as such – and use it to give people solutions that speak more directly to them.”

Britain’s exit from the European Union following the 2016 referendum had significant implications for place policy, both structurally in how place-based development was funded, and politically in revealing the depth of alienation between “left-behind” communities and the corridors of power. The link was starkly described by the Member of Parliament for Leigh, Andy Burnham, in a public debate about city identity at Manchester’s design

“No Government of any colour did anything like enough to ask, what is the future of these places? How do we get good jobs back in? And then they entered a whole new wave of profound social change when the European Union expanded, and again they were left to cope with it on their own. Constituencies like mine got no help for the primary schools when there were more and more Polish kids turning up. They got no help for the GP surgeries.

“You can’t say that the Leave vote was just xenophobia or racism. The deeper feeling is—no-one looks at us, thinks about us, cares for us. It was a profound cry for change in the way the country is run. When these places needed help with manufacturing, the national policy was on services. With technical education, it was on universities. With council housing, it’s on owner occupation. National policy has never given them answers.

“Devolution in England was not conceived to be the answer to the referendum result, but we now must embrace it as such and use it to give people solutions that speak more directly to them, focused on them and their needs.” (Design Manchester, 2016, 38:38–40:24)

In terms of funding, support for regional and place-based development had substantially come through European structural funds, including the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund. The funds continued to support UK projects through the 2014–2020 programming period and the subsequent closure arrangements, notwithstanding the UK’s formal departure from the European Union on 31 January 2020 (MHCLG, 2018).

Boris Johnson’s administration sought to respond to both the funding requirement and the political challenge through the Levelling Up agenda, the Levelling Up Fund, the Towns Fund and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (DLUHC, 2021, 2022a,

2022b; MHCLG, 2019b). Under Rishi Sunak, the Long-Term Plan for Towns established the immediate programme precursor to Pride in Place (DLUHC, 2023).

While successive policy iterations had highlighted the benefits of regeneration, inclusive growth and community participation in shaping long-term outcomes, significant challenges remained. Participation might have become an accepted policy aim, but the practical methods through which communities could participate meaningfully in shaping the future of their neighbourhoods remained inchoate, with challenges around representation, accountability, capacity-building, the role of local institutions and the relationship between professional expertise and community knowledge (DCLG, 2010; UPP Foundation Civic University Commission, 2019).

From Levelling Up to Pride in Place

The Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper in 2022 acknowledged that disparities between places could not be understood solely in terms of economic performance but also reflected differences in health, education, skills, housing, transport, wellbeing, civic pride and local opportunity (DLUHC, 2022a).

In this respect, it represented continuity as well as change, retaining the emphasis on economic growth, productivity and devolution while attaching greater weight to tackling inequalities experienced by towns, cities and neighbourhoods that

“The significance of Pride in Place lies in the opportunity it provides to advance the practice of place transformation and inclusive growth.”

had not benefited from national economic growth. The White Paper recognised that people’s experience of the places in which they live influences wellbeing, opportunity and confidence in public institutions. The inclusion of missions relating to health, education, local leadership and pride in place illustrated a growing understanding that successful places are characterised not only by economic performance but also by the quality of everyday life experienced by their residents (DLUHC, 2022a).

The Pride in Place programme grew from this broader policy framework but with a more specific focus. Levelling Up addressed spatial inequalities across selected towns, cities and regions through a mixture of competitively allocated and formula-based funding programmes. The programme’s immediate origins lay in the Long-Term Plan for Towns, introduced by

the Conservative government in 2023. Following the change of government, it was recast and expanded in 2025 as the Plan for Neighbourhoods, before being incorporated into the wider Pride in Place programme (DLUHC, 2023; MHCLG, 2025, 2026b).

The revised approach shifted the emphasis from town centres towards hyperlocal neighbourhoods experiencing long-term disadvantage and placed greater weight on resident involvement, neighbourhood governance and community-led change. This policy shift developed alongside the work of the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods, chaired by Baroness Hilary Armstrong, which was building a renewed evidence base and policy case for long-term neighbourhood-level intervention (Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods [ICON], 2025, 2026).

What Pride in Place inherited from its predecessor is its long-term perspective, with funded areas eligible to receive up to £20 million in funding and support over ten years to support sustainable positive transformation (MHCLG, 2025, 2026b). This reflects lessons from earlier programmes, particularly New Deal for Communities, which showed that deeply embedded challenges are hard to shift through short-term interventions and that time is needed to develop governance, relationships, capacity and a shared vision (DCLG, 2010; MHCLG, 2025).

The important departure of Pride in Place is the value it places on the emotional attachment only local people can have with their place, which underpins the community agency central to the programme. The local MP and local authority have formal roles in supporting the programme and relevant local councillors are represented within its governance, but the vision and plan are to be co-created by a neighbourhood board and the wider community. The local authority acts initially as the accountable body, while the programme expects areas to move progressively towards community-led delivery. In effect, although nationally created, the programme prescribes a process of community co-design and seeks to place residents at the heart of decision-making (MHCLG, 2026b).

In how it is structured, Pride in Place offers a response to deficiencies identified in previous programmes but also raises the questions discussed in this report, around

early timelines, knowledge-sharing and best practice, skills, capacity-building, governance, accountability, evaluation and sustainable positive transformation.

The significance of Pride in Place lies not only in the neighbourhoods selected for funding, nor in the investment allocated, but in the opportunity it provides to advance the practice of place transformation and inclusive growth.

Earlier programmes focused on designing better regeneration and investment. Pride in Place instead asks how government, public services, professions and local stakeholders can partner in a community-led process of neighbourhood co-design, stewardship and long-term transformation. It is this opportunity to develop and trial new methodologies at scale that distinguishes the present moment in the evolution of UK place-based policy.

MP's leaflet promoting community engagement with Pride in Place in Plymouth

Pride in Place: Community Led Change

Morice Town, Mount Wise
and Devonport



Luke
Pollard
MP

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic literature argues that place-based programmes are most effective when they integrate local knowledge, collaborative governance, and long-term investment (Madgin & Howcroft, 2024).

Neighbourhoods are often conceptualised as socially constructed spaces where everyday life, identity, and local participation intersect, making them critical sites for place-based policy (Forrest & Kearns, 2001).

Neighbourhoods as both a geographic place and also a place of belonging and identity are considered spatial units in which change can be enabled. This approach is situated within place theory, which draws on research into place attachment and meaning from environmental and community psychology. Place theory suggests that people's preferences, perceptions, and emotional connections to particular places can influence community social cohesion, participation, and development (Healey, 2010; Altman & Low, 1992; Manzo & Perkins, 2006; Proshansky, 1978).

Massey argues that place is not just a physical location, but a collection of social relations and brought to life through daily experience (Massey, 1994). This approach states that qualities and meanings of the specific physical setting in which community planning and development take place can play a critical role in the process as

well. Subjective experiences of place such as thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about local community places are understood to impact our behaviours toward such places, thus influencing whether and how communities might participate in local planning efforts (Manzo & Perkins, 2006, p. 336). Place-based programmes aim to address feelings of attachment or connection to the places where people live, by creating impacts on a range of factors including 'community engagement, local heritage, cultural opportunities, access and quality of local amenities – including green and blue spaces – as well as the state and appearance of housing and the local high street' (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities [DLUHC], 2024).

Neighbourhood renewal can therefore be seen to be more successful at improving 'place', as opposed to 'people'-based outcomes (such as employment and education). For example, in the evaluation of change across the UK New Deal for Communities (NDC) areas between 2002 and 2008 the neighbourhoods showed improvement, or deterioration, in relation to 36 core indicators, seven from each of the three place-related and three people-related outcomes (Batty, 2010, p.21). According to Crisp et al., the NDC residents were 'also more likely to feel satisfied with where they live, able to influence local decision making and that their neighbourhood is improving, express trust in others and local agencies, and be involved in local voluntary activities' (Crisp et al., 2023, p. 20).

In neighbourhood programmes, residents who are involved in neighbourhood regeneration programmes have better outcomes compared to residents who have not been involved.

Research problem

The investment in place-based programmes is underpinned by evidence of large spatial disparities within the United Kingdom, variously termed ‘deprived’, ‘left behind’ or ‘doubly marginalised’ (Tomaney et al., 2024; Houlden et al., 2024). These are places that are recognised to be systematically disadvantaged over time and, in the UK, are concentrated in major urban centres, and in post-industrial and coastal towns. The magnitude and impact of the deprivation is highlighted through poorer economic, health, social and political outcomes for those living in ‘left behind’ areas (Houlden et al., 2024). These places are also recognised to have corresponding low levels of ‘pride’ or place attachment which engenders collective feelings of loss, akin to bereavement (Tomaney et al., 2024).

Research has shown that where communities have suffered from a loss or erosion of their place-based identity there is a corresponding decrease in people’s satisfaction in their local areas. This lack of “community feel” is often attributed to a corresponding rise in antisocial behaviour as well as a neglect of public spaces, such as local parks and high streets. Residents feel ‘left behind’ and express this feeling in terms of abandonment or neglect, fuelling

discontent and dissatisfaction with the unfairness of the prevailing economic, social and political situation, expressed at the ballot box in many countries (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Tomaney 2024, p. 1237).

Linked to low levels of place attachment, left behind or marginalized places also tend to have low levels of social infrastructure. For example, the APPG on left behind neighbourhoods recently found that the 225 neighbourhoods they identified as being ‘left behind’ had a social infrastructure deficit, defined as suffering from poor connectivity (physical and digital), low levels of community engagement and a lack of places and spaces to meet (APPG, 2020). This is set in the context of the decimation of social infrastructure and the community and voluntary sector through successive waves of funding cuts (Dobson, 2022).

A further challenge identified by Howcroft et al. in the link between pride and identity as measures of economic deprivation, is that pride references the emotional symptoms of geographical inequality and to the assumed, imagined and real anxieties of the so-called left behind, but it does so without addressing their structural causes (Howcroft et al., 2025). Marsh highlights how the metrics for measuring “pride in place” are not well-developed, and the language of pride has been used inconsistently across cultural policy and practice (Marsh et al., 2025).

While policy evaluations highlight increased local autonomy and investment in

deprived areas, there is still limited evidence of transformative outcomes. Studies and reviews have identified the following possible challenges:

- Empowering communities:
Interventions in deprived areas have failed to reduce deprivation as a result of lack of community and local involvement and ownership. Community participation is shaped by power, not just opportunity: involving communities in governance does not automatically equal empowerment—because participation is always structured by existing inequalities in resources, knowledge, and institutional control.
- Social Infrastructure: Physical infrastructure investments dominate in Levelling Up, with up to 87% of the £5.17bn of proposed spending to date committed to physical infrastructure projects, while the importance of civil society organisations and social infrastructure for community well-being is overlooked (Davis & Collinge, 2021).
- Understanding change: Expertise by experience is undervalued in formal systems. Lived experience is rarely treated as equivalent to quantitative or technical evidence, even though it is crucial for understanding neighbourhood realities.

In the next section the role of neighbourhoods is discussed in the context of the three thematic pillars of the Pride in Place

programme: 1) thriving places, 2) building stronger communities, and 3) giving residents control.

Thriving places: the role of neighbourhoods

Thriving places emerge most effectively when physical infrastructure investment is combined with social infrastructure, community participation, and long-term governance structures, rather than relying on environmental improvements alone (Jacobs, 1961; Evans, 2005). Within this context, neighbourhoods are increasingly positioned as key spatial units for regeneration, where locally grounded knowledge can shape more responsive and context-specific interventions.

Forrest and Kearns (2001) conceptualise neighbourhoods not simply as bounded geographical areas but as social spaces shaped by networks, relationships and everyday interactions. They argue that neighbourhoods play an important role in shaping how individuals connect to wider social structures. Jacobs (1961), one of the original proponents of neighbourhoods, argued that vibrant, mixed-use neighbourhoods are the foundation of healthy city social life. She emphasized that casual, low-impact street interactions create the “social capital” and trust necessary to keep communities safe and self-policing. Jacobs’ emphasis on everyday interaction remains relevant to Pride in Place, because it challenges approaches that treat regeneration as primarily a question of physical

improvement. Instead, it suggests that the success of thriving places depends on whether investment creates opportunities for social connection and collective life.

The quality of the public realm, including streets, parks, squares, green spaces, sports fields and community facilities, is a fundamental component of thriving places. Well-designed, safe, accessible, and inclusive public spaces encourage social interaction, physical activity, and civic participation, contributing to health, wellbeing, and local pride. This has been referred to as the ‘space between buildings’ (e.g. Gehl, 2010) and evidence suggests that investment in public realm improvements can strengthen community identity, support local economies, and enhance perceptions of safety, particularly when projects are co-designed with local communities and respond to local needs.

That social capital and the neighbourhood are of policy interest today is due to the recognition of the role of ‘local community’ (Etzioni, 1993), self-help and mutuality as means to tackle area deprivation, disadvantage and social exclusion. An influential perspective on this is that neighbourhood decline sets in train a cumulative decline in social capital. Networks are disrupted and weakened, population turnover erodes familiarity and trust, and policies and initiatives aimed at reversing the decline are being implemented in a context of community disengagement and disillusionment. The implication is that poor neighbourhoods in general lack

the necessary qualities of self-help, mutuality and trust which could assist in their regeneration—and this in part explains, and is a cumulative product of, their decline (Forrest & Kearns, p. 2139). This is linked to the research on ‘neighbourhood effects’, where poor neighbourhoods could be seen as systematically disadvantaging their residents (Lupton, 2003; Wilson, 1987) and where neighbourhood is directly linked to outcomes including child development, educational outcomes, delinquency, teen pregnancy, health, employment and earnings (Jencks & Mayer, 1990; Ellen & Turner, 1997; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Another way that neighbourhoods play an important part in social life is not only through their internal composition and dynamics but also according to how they are perceived by residents in other neighbourhoods and by the institutions and agencies which play a key role in opportunity structures. Thus, the identity and contextual roles of the neighbourhood are closely linked to one another. For example the evidence on NDC found that ‘Indicators of people’s feelings about their neighbourhoods saw the biggest improvements: NDC residents recognised change brought about by the NDC programme and were more satisfied with their neighbourhoods as places to live’ and this correlated with evidence of statistically significant positive improvements on 11 out of 36 indicators compared to similarly deprived NDC areas (Crisp et al., 2023, p.15). In the Feeling Towns research, Marsh argues that

pride in place is not simply an outcome of physical regeneration but is rooted in people's emotional attachment, collective identity, and capacity to shape their local environment (Marsh et al., 2024, 2025). The research highlights the importance of social infrastructure, cultural participation, and community-led governance in creating lasting pride and belonging (Howcroft et al., 2025). Neighbourhoods provide the scale at which social networks, trust, and local identity develop, making them critical to successful regeneration.

Stronger communities: social infrastructure and social capital

The re-emergence of concerns with 'neighbourhood' and 'community' and the links to social cohesion are, however, also enmeshed in a partial reconceptualisation of the role of the neighbourhood in the context of social capital (Forrest & Kearns, 2001, p. 2137). The concept of social capital was defined by Putnam (1993, 2000) as 'features of social organizations, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit'.

Bourdieu also seeks to define 'capital' as 'the set of actually usable resources and powers' (Bourdieu, 1986) that play a vital role in producing and reproducing profits in individuals' life opportunities. They generate the trust, reciprocity and capacity for civic engagement which are essential to the functioning of modern democracy (Taylor 2000, p. 1027).

Issues of neighbourhood cohesion and the implications for patterns of participation, care and supervision are bound up with issues of the quality and strength of the ties between neighbours (Forrest & Kearns, 2001).

Social capital, broadly defined, is the development of relationships and how these are impacted through the notion of strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). Belonging and local pride depend on these connections with and perceptions of the wider local environment. Engagement in local civil society and use of local facilities create the 'weak ties' that contribute to social capital (Granovetter, 1973). For community and place-based groups, the weak ties are key, as they are the informal and local relations that help sustain a community.

Thus, the concept of weak ties becomes important. For example, research has shown that excluded communities neither have the strong ties of close connections nor the weaker ties of mutual help that are essential to a neighbourhood (Taylor, 2000 p. 1027). Therefore, the significance of the neighbourhood is partly as an important arena for the development and maintenance of weak ties. These kinds of contacts range in their terms from a nodding acquaintance to modest levels of practical help, such as taking in a parcel (Henning & Lieberg, 1996). These contacts are, however, not only an important source of general well-being, but may provide important bridges between networks of strong ties. For this reason, weak ties are of particular

“Libraries, schools, playgrounds, playing fields and swimming pools are vital parts of social infrastructure. So too are sidewalks, courtyards and other places that invite people into the public realm.”

importance for vulnerable and marginal groups.

The social connections and socialities that are built and maintained through accessing social infrastructure can create a ‘social surplus’ or ‘social capital’; encouraging trust, civility, encounter and common purpose, which can be seen as an alternative form of capital (Latham & Layton, 2019). Therefore, place-based investment at neighbourhood level can assist in re-establishing these weak ties.

One of the key ways to strengthen and generate weak ties and form social capital is through building better social infrastructure or ‘third places’ (Oldenburg, 1999; Klinenberg, 2018; Latham & Layton, 2019). This refers to the networks of

spaces, facilities, institutions, and groups that create affordances for social connection and building of reciprocal trust in physical places. The importance of ‘social infrastructure’ at a neighbourhood level encompasses urban community insights as well as a recognition of civic and third sector organisations, social enterprises, co-operatives, and places such as libraries, parks, and community centres. Klinenberg defines social infrastructure as ‘the physical places and organisations that shape the way people interact... and that invite people into the public realm’ (2018, p. 5) and as follows:

Public institutions, such as libraries, schools, playgrounds, parks, athletic fields, and swimming pools, are vital parts of the

social infrastructure. So too are sidewalks, courtyards, community gardens, and other spaces that invite people into the public realm. Community organisations, including churches and civic associations, act as social infrastructures when they have an established physical space where people can assemble, as do regularly scheduled markets for food, furniture, clothing, art, and other consumer goods (Klinenberg, 2018, p. 17).

For example, Local Trust's ten-year Big Local programme (Institute for Voluntary Action Research, 2015) provided investment in social infrastructure to enable access to facilities where communities can come together, the people to support community-based projects, and organisations that give residents a real say in what happens in their areas.

In NDC, the evaluation found that over 130 outputs from the ten-year evaluation demonstrate positive outcomes in neighbourhoods, with some focusing on social capital such as reducing social isolation, developing community groups, voluntary organisations and helping to generate a greater sense of community spirit and cohesion and employment opportunities. But critically, social infrastructure was central to the outcomes, with indicators around opening community hubs and spaces and improving the physical environment. (Crisp et al., 2023, p. 22). Social infrastructure provides the physical and organisational foundations through which social capital is created. Therefore, stronger

communities are not only created through physical regeneration but through sustained investment in the social relationships, spaces, and institutions that allow communities to thrive.

Give residents control: empowering communities

“The community dimension has been central to this Programme (NDC) and, on balance, most observers think it has brought real benefits in its wake... from the outset regeneration schemes need to establish what the community dimension actually means and to set appropriate objectives: consultation, involvement, engagement, empowerment, or delivery?” (Batty et al., 2010, p. 44).

There is a general consensus in the United Kingdom about the need to shift from top-down to bottom-up, and that power needs to be devolved outwards and downwards (Taylor, 2000, p. 1024). UK policy on economic and social progress has relied on the power of government and businesses to help the country as a whole, and left-behind towns and neighbourhoods in particular. Taylor argues that this hasn't worked, because what is missing in our current model is ‘community power: the role of local people, acting together spontaneously or through sustainable local networks and institutions, to design and deliver the kind of communities and places they want to be part of’ (2000, p. 1024). Models of community involvement can be polarised into a choice between bottom-up

and top-down, but there is an increasing recognition that what is needed is “a combination of top-down and bottom-up initiatives” (Geddes, 1998, p. 92). This has been termed ‘middle ground’ between agencies, between communities and between agencies and communities. This requires mediators or brokers, whether individuals or institutions, whose role would be to work horizontally rather than vertically (Abbott, 1996; Wilkinson & Applebee, 1999; Taylor, 2000, p. 1030).

In the shift towards community governance, understanding roles is important. Policy devices legislated through the Localism Act (2011) have caused a shift through which ordinary citizens are increasingly taking on the role of policy-maker in their local communities. Despite the promise of democratic renewal this brings, it raises a number of challenges for civil society organisations and individual actors as they assume new roles in new structures of governance and decision-making frameworks. Increasingly, civil society actors are instituted into a position of responsibility without the means to fulfil their new role, specifically but not exclusively in terms of access to relevant data (Johnson et al., 2018). Taylor argues that the effective engagement of communities in governance requires the development of robust structures which can stimulate and act as a channel for the views of different communities, command the trust of different parts of neighbourhood communities and be accountable for the role they play

in engaging with other partners (Taylor, 2000, p. 1032). Community involvement in governance requires new approaches to skills and learning for capacity-building in communities but also to capacity building in partner organisations (Taylor, 2000, p. 1026). There is a strong tendency, still, to assume that the skills deficit lies within communities rather than partner institutions. The new ways of working and the recasting of power relationships that partnership implies will require a substantial learning programme to develop the essential new skills and capacities among professionals and to establish the new careers that partnership requires.

Co-design approaches are increasingly understood as valuable in empowering communities in place-based programmes as they can ‘galvanise local communities into action’, bringing people together and turning their interest into participation, contribution and decision-making, working together to improve places (Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Courage & McKeown, 2019; Walker, 2018). Participation in co-design processes, particularly place-making, may enhance individual well-being and access to valuable social capital (Corcoran et al., 2017) through increased skills and networks (Pearson et al., 2025). For example, the Big Local programme provided an evidence base for the process and impacts of community empowerment through community-led decision-making which places residents in control of their own neighbourhood programmes. Evaluation from

the programme found that community involvement in the design, governance and implementation not only enabled targeted initiatives which respond to community needs, but provided lasting benefits through the development of improved capacity in communities to sustain activities and outcomes. (Crisp et al., 2023, pp. 10-11). This can be seen in the NDC, where around 44 per cent of NDC residents who remained in NDC areas for the duration of the programme participated in an NDC activity at some point, and around four per cent of all residents had volunteered for an NDC partnership (Crisp et al., 2023, p. 18).

Key factors in building social capital included regular social activities and events, effective leadership and trust-building. Trust is a vital component at the beginning of such initiatives in order to be well-received by communities (Pearson et al., 2025). But many communities who have been through successive rounds of regeneration initiatives face the problem of burn-out, as increasing demands on community representatives such as helping to bid for funds, mobilising community support and managing a complex array of projects, create too heavy a burden to be sustained (Gilchrist, 1999; Taylor, 2000).

Another reason for effectively involving people who know a neighbourhood is in relation to knowledge capital. NDC highlighted the crucial role of resident involvement in shaping interventions and highlighting community needs and concerns (Crisp et al., 2023, p. 18).

Residents' knowledge is an important and previously neglected resource, as local people know most about local conditions. They can be crucial in both the diagnosis of the systemic causes of problems and who should be engaged in their amelioration. They also know about existing community networks and how to develop these, rather than having them ruptured by clumsy top-down or external interventions (Taylor, 2000, p. 1029). Effective community-led approaches do not replace institutional support but require a partnership between communities, public agencies, and other stakeholders, creating a "middle ground" supported by trusted intermediaries and collaborative governance structures. Co-design and participatory approaches then provide processes through which local knowledge, skills, and lived experience can build capacity and deliver change. Therefore, thriving place-based approaches depend on creating governance structures that genuinely share power, recognise community expertise, and enable long-term collaboration between residents, institutions, and local organisations.

Data and evidence: measuring what matters

Madgin argues for the need to move beyond seeing place solely as a geographic location or an administrative boundary or even a functional economic area and for incorporating 'the lived and felt experiences of place within our decision-making processes' (Madgin & Howcroft, 2024).

For decision-makers, the turn to recognise that people are “experts by experience” (Social Renewal Advisory Board, 2021, p. 51) is supported by the validation of lived experience within policy-making and the recent release of the Citizens White Paper (Levin et al., 2024) which provides clear recognition that we need to better understand ‘everyday’ experiences in and of place. “While many politicians and civic leaders might think they implicitly understand ‘their place’, their assumptions are rarely grounded in systematically gathered evidence... This is underpinned by a lack of trust between communities, politicians and public institutions.” (McNulty & Riley, 2023).

Measuring social outcomes in place-based change presents a challenge, because pride in place is rooted in collective experiences, emotional connections, and people’s sense of belonging. Effective measures therefore need to capture the complexity of how residents perceive, experience, and relate to their communities, particularly if they are intended to support the renewal of social infrastructure. However, existing metrics often reduce these complex experiences into simplified indicators, such as anti-social behaviour levels, perceptions of area attractiveness, and the Social Fabric Index. While these measures provide useful data, they risk overlooking the lived and emotional dimensions of place attachment. As Howcroft et al. (2025) argue, approaches based on fixed indicators and quantitative measures may fail to reflect the di-

verse ways in which residents experience community, belonging, and pride in place. This highlights the need for frameworks that combine measurable outcomes with qualitative understandings of local identity, relationships, and lived experience (Howcroft et al., 2025).

Conventional approaches to place-based programme evaluation and value-for-money (VfM) assessments often struggle to demonstrate strong business cases for investment in disadvantaged areas, where benefits may be long-term, relational, and difficult to quantify. As McNulty and Riley (2023) argue, if investment decisions are to recognise the value of place identity, pride, cultural assets, and social outcomes alongside economic returns, assessment frameworks need to incorporate richer qualitative evidence and residents’ lived experiences. This aligns with the New Deal for Communities (NDC) principle of “measuring what matters”, which critiques traditional evaluation approaches for focusing on predetermined outcomes and narrow indicators, often overlooking wider impacts such as community capacity, resilience, and social infrastructure (Crisp et al., 2023).

A key challenge is that externally imposed indicators can define both the processes and priorities of regeneration from the top down. While standardised measures enable comparison between places and monitoring of change over time, they can also reinforce deficit-based narratives by emphasising deprivation and need rather

than recognising existing community assets, relationships, and local knowledge (Taylor, 2000). Increasingly, research highlights the importance of enabling communities to participate not only in shaping interventions but also in gathering evidence, monitoring progress, and defining what successful change looks like (Noponen, 1997; Taylor, 2000).

Measuring social capital and social infrastructure remains complex. As Woolcock and Narayan (2000) argue, a single measure of social capital is unlikely to exist because it is multidimensional and changes over time, shaped by the relationship between informal networks and formal institutions. Similarly, social infrastructure generates multiple forms of value that are difficult to capture through conventional economic appraisal. A library, for example, may simultaneously provide access to knowledge, support local enterprise, reduce loneliness, and create opportunities for social connection (Tomaney et al., 2024).

This complexity creates challenges for policymakers seeking robust evidence, as qualitative data and lived experience are sometimes viewed as less rigorous than quantitative measures. Yet informal knowledge, community narratives, and local stories provide important insights into how places function and how change is experienced. Residents are not only beneficiaries of regeneration but also important sources of knowledge, capable of identifying local assets, monitoring services, and

shaping more effective interventions (Taylor, 2000).

In the UK, the OCSI Community Needs Index (CNI) attempts to complement traditional deprivation measures by capturing the social conditions that influence community resilience, including community engagement, civic participation, and access to social infrastructure. Such approaches recognise that disadvantage is not solely determined by economic indicators but also by the strength of local connections, opportunities for participation, and the capacity of communities to act collectively.

Ultimately, understanding thriving places requires evaluation frameworks that move beyond measuring deficits and outputs towards capturing relationships, belonging, identity, and collective capacity. Communities are sustained not only through physical assets and services, but through shared histories, memories, and future aspirations—the “stories” and practices of commitment that maintain social bonds and shape a continuing sense of place (Bellah et al., 2007; Tomaney et al., 2024). Measuring place-based change requires moving beyond conventional economic metrics to capture social value, lived experience, community capacity, and the less tangible benefits of pride, belonging, and social infrastructure. But it also means that communities can find ways to capture and share their own measures of change, through stories and qualitative data.

The study

What is the experience so far?

THE STUDY: WHAT IS THE EXPERIENCE SO FAR?

The study is built around stakeholder interviews with seven Pride in Place neighbourhoods as comparators, followed by consultation with stakeholders at a session of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Key Cities, follow-up engagement with officials at MHCLG and a questionnaire circulated to member universities of the Key Cities Innovation Network.

The process is timed to align with the preparatory development stage of Pride in Place programmes in neighbourhoods, with interviews conducted between March and July 2026. With the exception of the larger Phase 1 areas inherited from the Long-Term Plan for Towns via the Plan for Neighbourhoods, most of the Phase 2 neighbourhoods have been selected and notified and the local authorities and Members of Parliament are facilitating the appointment of Chairs and formation of neighbourhood boards. Most will be required to submit their plans to MHCLG in November and it is hoped the insights and recommendations flowing from the study can offer useful learning in this fast-moving context.

The study offers a baseline snapshot of what interviewees perceive as the priorities and which key issues present in their neighbourhoods. The seven study neigh-

bourhoods – all situated within the 22 Key Cities across England and Wales – were selected to reflect a range of characteristics found across the wider cohort, including geographical location and spatial attributes (see Table 1).

The interviews

The methodology used was a series of qualitative interviews, separately with the Member of Parliament and the responsible local authority officer for Pride in Place in the study neighbourhoods. Interviews were undertaken in March, April, May, June and July 2026, each taking approximately 1 hour. Neighbourhoods were selected to reflect a range of characteristics found across the wider cohort, including geographical location and spatial attributes (see Table 2).

The interview schedule (see Appendix 2) focused on governance, data, evaluation, and community engagement across participating areas and was structured into four thematic sections.

- The first examines the context of Pride in Place, including how stakeholders understand the programme, perceived opportunities and challenges, and prior experience of government-funded regeneration.
- The second focuses on data, monitoring, and evaluation practices, including whether baseline research exists, how data will be collected over the 10-year programme,

Neighbourhood	Phase	MSOA	Typology	Region/ Nation	Big Local
Bradeley, Chell Heath & Fegg Hayes	2b	Stoke-on-Trent E02002953	Suburb	Midlands	Yes
Devonport, Mount Wise & Morice Town	2	Plymouth E02003147	Urban	South-West	No
Luton in Chatham	2b	Luton E02003333	Suburb	South-East	Yes
Morecambe West End	2	Lancaster E02005229	Coastal town	North-West	Yes
Pendleton	2	Salford E02001180	Inner city	North-West	No
Twerton & Whiteway	2	Bath and North East Somerset E02002995	Suburb	South-West	No
Wrexham	1	Wrexham (multiple)	Market town	Wales	No

Table 1. Representative characteristics and replicability of the study neighbourhoods.

Neighbourhood	MP	Parliamentary constituency	Key City / LA
Bradeley, Chell Heath & Fegg Hayes	David Williams	Stoke-on-Trent North	Stoke-on-Trent
Devonport, Mount Wise & Morice Town	Luke Pollard	Plymouth Sutton & Devonport	Plymouth
Luton in Chatham	Tristan Osborne	Chatham & Aylesford	Medway
Morecambe West End	Lizzi Collinge	Morecambe & Lunesdale	Lancaster
Pendleton	Rebecca Long-Bailey	Salford	Salford
Twerton & Whiteway	Wera Hobhouse	Bath	Bath & North East Somerset
Wrexham	Andrew Ranger	Wrexham	Wales

Table 2. Parliamentary and local authority context.

“Future research should include residents, community organisations and board members to understand lived experience, participation and community ownership.”

what indicators and evaluation methods are planned, and how data governance, storage, and analytical capacity are being developed.

- The third addresses community, social infrastructure and co-design, including the role of local organisations, existing community assets and gaps, and the extent to which co-design principles are being applied in practice. It also explores approaches to resident engagement and the integration of local data with national MHCLG requirements.
- The final section addresses governance and implementation structures, including the formation and composition of neighbourhood boards, stakeholder roles, decision-making processes, boundary definitions, inter-neighbourhood

collaboration, and the potential role of Key Cities in supporting coordination and knowledge exchange.

All interviewees were asked the same questions. The interviews were recorded for reference and transcribed. The transcriptions were then coded according to a set of thematic codes identified from the literature.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty Ethics and Integrity Committee at the University of Plymouth and all participants were provided with an information sheet. The interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed against the three main thematic PiP objectives.

Limitations of the study

The study was qualitative, based on a small sample of seven case study neighbourhoods and included only Members of Parliament and local authority officers. The purpose of this stage of research was to understand the institutional arrangements, governance structures and delivery challenges associated with implementing Pride in Place during the programme's preparatory phase, before neighbourhood boards and Chairs were established (Phase 1 Wrexham excepted).

A key limitation of the study was therefore that the process could not yet engage with resident or community stakeholders, and the study does not claim to represent resident perspectives. The findings reflect planned activities, not implementation or outcomes. While we did not speak to community members directly, the questions did seek responses on the role of the community and stakeholders.

Research on future stages of development and implementation should certainly include residents, community organisations and neighbourhood board members to understand lived experience, perceptions of participation and the transition towards community ownership.

The study should therefore be understood as a snapshot at a particular point in a rapidly developing programme: governance arrangements, community engagement and delivery approaches were continuing

to evolve during and after the research period.

The programme continued to develop following completion of the fieldwork, including the publication by MHCLG on 12 August 2026 of detailed guidance on the content of Phase 2 ten-year visions. Where the findings identify gaps in guidance or support, they should therefore be understood as reflecting the position experienced by interviewees during the research period.

Neighbourhood selection

The funding for the programme now known as Pride in Place was awarded in several



Figure 1. Map of the study neighbourhoods.

stages. The first 55 places, now forming part of Phase 1, were announced in October 2023 by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) as part of the Long-Term Plan for Towns. A further 20 places were added to that programme in March 2024, bringing the total to 75. Following the change of government later that year, the programme was retained and reformed in March 2025 as the Plan for Neighbourhoods, with the new government confirming the funding commitments made to all 75 places.

This was followed in September 2025 by the selection of 169 ‘Phase 2’ hyperlocal neighbourhoods under the renamed Pride in Place Programme, and a further 40 neighbourhoods announced in 2026, which for ease of reference we refer to as ‘Phase 2b’ in this study. Together these bring the main programme footprint to 284 places, alongside an additional 95 areas supported under the Pride in Place Impact Fund.

Unlike many previous place-based funding initiatives, places funded through Pride in Place were selected using objective measures of need rather than through competitive bidding. The methodology has, however, evolved alongside the programme.

The 75 Phase 1 places – 58 in England, 10 in Scotland, five in Wales and two in Northern Ireland – were originally selected in two stages under the Long-Term Plan for Towns. For the initial 55 places, lower-tier local authorities were ranked according to a Levelling Up Need measure incorporating

indicators relating to skills, healthy life expectancy, pay and productivity. Population and geographic-spread criteria were then applied, before the most deprived eligible built-up area within each selected local authority was identified using the relevant national Index of Multiple Deprivation. The methodology was extended for the additional 20 places announced in March 2024, using updated Levelling Up Need data alongside modifications intended to increase geographic spread and take account of whether areas had previously benefited from other major levelling-up programmes.

The later Phase 2 and additional 40 neighbourhoods represent a significant shift in spatial scale and selection methodology. Rather than larger towns, these are hyperlocal neighbourhoods, generally containing around 10,000 residents, selected using a composite measure designed to identify communities experiencing both high deprivation and high levels of community need. This combines:

- Deprivation, measured through the relevant Index of Multiple Deprivation, capturing disadvantage relating to factors including income, employment, health, education, crime, housing and living environment; and
- Community need, measured through the OCSI Community Needs Index (CNI), which assesses factors including access to services and amenities, civic assets and levels of community connectedness.

“Seven neighbourhoods were selected to reflect characteristics across the wider cohort, including location and spatial attributes.”

These measures were combined to create a neighbourhood need ranking, alongside additional criteria intended to achieve an appropriate geographic distribution of investment, including a cap of one funded neighbourhood per parliamentary constituency.

For the additional 40 English neighbourhoods announced in 2026, this methodology was further refined through the use of updated deprivation data and an additional community-cohesion filter, restricting eligibility to neighbourhoods within the 20% of local authorities recording the weakest levels of community cohesion.

For this study, seven neighbourhoods were selected to reflect a range of characteristics found across the wider cohort, including geographical location and spatial attributes. The study group includes one Phase 1 neighbourhood (Wrexham) and six Phase 2 neighbourhoods, with Luton in Chatham

(Medway) and Bradeley, Chell Heath & Fegg Hayes (Stoke-on-Trent) belonging to the additional cohort of 40 places referred to as ‘Phase 2b’ in this report.

The study neighbourhoods also have differing histories of place-based intervention. Three of the Phase 2 study areas have previously participated in Big Local, while others have experienced major regeneration or place-based investment through programmes including New Deal for Communities, Levelling Up Fund and locally led regeneration schemes. This provides a useful additional dimension to the comparison: Pride in Place is not beginning from a common baseline, but entering neighbourhoods with differing levels of inherited civic infrastructure, institutional capacity and experience of community-led regeneration.



The Ravenscliffe Pride in Place neighbourhood is on the east side of Key City Bradford in West Yorkshire

Study neighbourhood profiles

STUDY NEIGHBOURHOOD PROFILES

Profiles of the seven case study neighbourhoods selected for this study are presented in the following pages.

The profiles provide a concise overview of each neighbourhood, drawing together key contextual information with a focus on the challenges. They also identify each neighbourhood's spatial context, alongside previous funding and regeneration initiatives. These are not systematic profiles, but snapshots to give context for the interview findings.

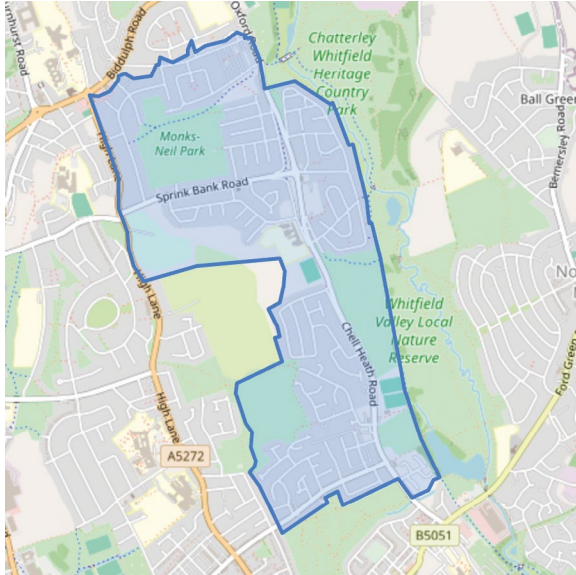
While each neighbourhood has a distinct history and identity—from former industrial and mining communities such as Bradeley, Chell Heath and Fegg Hayes, to coastal towns such as Morecambe West End, dockyard communities such as Devonport, and city-centre areas such as Wrexham—they share common challenges including high levels of deprivation, inequalities in health and employment outcomes, and barriers to skills, services and community infrastructure.

BRADELEY, CHELL HEATH AND FEGG HAYES

Local authority: Stoke-on-Trent

Parliamentary constituency: Stoke-on-Trent North

PiP programme phase: 2b



MapIt, © OpenStreetMap contributors. (Map is of the E02002953 MSOA area. Precise PiP boundary to be finalised locally.)

Bradeley, Chell Heath and Fegg Hayes is a residential neighbourhood located in the north of Stoke-on-Trent, within the wider Potteries urban area. The neighbourhood has a population of approximately 5,700 residents. It developed from the city's industrial and mining heritage and contains a mix of established residential estates, traditional terraced housing and more modern housing developments.

Several LSOAs within the area fall within the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in England, with some areas within the most deprived 10% nationally, reflecting inequalities in income, employment, education and health. Economic challenges are linked to lower household incomes, reduced employment opportunities and skills gaps, while health outcomes are affected by higher levels of limiting long-term illness and poorer wellbeing compared with less deprived areas.

Previous funding: Stoke North Big Local <https://www.snbl.uk/>

DEVONPORT, MOUNTWISE & MORICE TOWN

Local authority: Plymouth

Parliamentary constituency: Plymouth Sutton & Devonport

PiP Programme phase: 2



MapIt, © OpenStreetMap contributors. (Map is of the E02003147 MSOA area. Precise PiP boundary to be finalised locally.) Photo: Tony Atkin

Devonport is a historic waterfront neighbourhood in Plymouth with a distinctive identity shaped by its role as a major dockyard area. The neighbourhood has a mix of traditional terraced housing, social housing and regeneration developments. It has a population of approximately 7,500 residents and experiences some of the highest levels of deprivation in Plymouth. Several LSOAs within the Devonport MSOA fall within the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods in England. Around 30% of children live in low-income families, while employment outcomes remain challenging, with higher levels of economic inactivity and lower household incomes compared with Plymouth and national averages.

Health inequalities are a significant feature of Devonport, with residents experiencing higher levels of limiting long-term illness, poorer wellbeing outcomes and lower life expectancy compared with less deprived areas of the city.

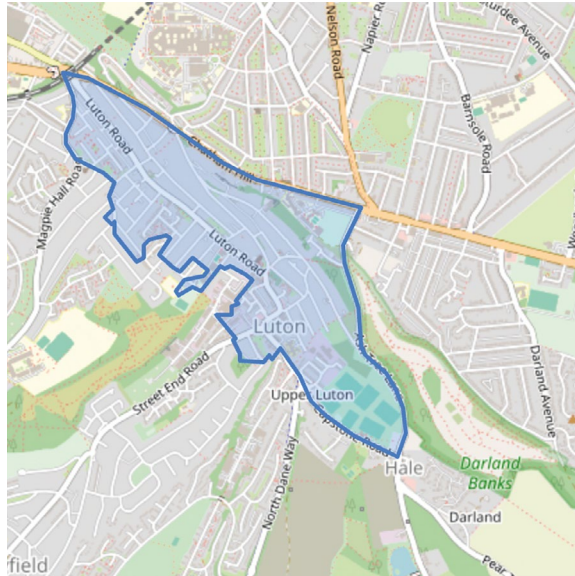
Previous funding: Devonport New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme, £48.7 million, 2001–2011.

LUTON IN CHATHAM

Local authority: Medway

Parliamentary constituency: Chatham & Aylesford

PiP programme phase: 2b



MapIt, © OpenStreetMap contributors. (Map is of the E02003333 MSOA area. Precise PiP boundary to be finalised locally.)

Luton is a suburban area and electoral ward in Chatham, Kent, with its historic roots as a village joined to Chatham as the dockyards expanded. It has an approximate population of 6,900 people and is characterised by a mix of post-war housing estates, established residential streets and local shopping centres, with strong connections to Chatham town centre.

Several LSOAs within the area fall within the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in England, with some areas within the most deprived 10% nationally and this is reflected in lower household incomes, higher unemployment and economic inactivity, poorer health outcomes, and educational attainment below national averages.

Previous funding: Medway Towns regeneration programme, including funding from the Government's Levelling Up Fund, with £17.9 million awarded in 2021, Big local – Luton Arches

MORECAMBE WEST END

Local authority: Lancaster

Parliamentary constituency: Morecambe & Lunesdale

PiP programme phase: 2



MapIt, © OpenStreetMap contributors. (Map is of the E02005229 MSOA area. Precise PiP boundary to be finalised locally.)

The West End of Morecambe is a distinct Victorian and Edwardian seaside neighbourhood featuring a promenade, local community projects, and a rich maritime history. The neighbourhood has a population of approximately 5,600 residents and is one of the most deprived communities within the Lancaster district. All the neighbourhood LSOAs are in the lowest 20% for IMD and some are in the lowest 10% nationally.

The local population is affected by low income (including relatively high levels of child and working age poverty), poor health, below average life expectancy, low educational attainment, poor housing and homelessness, as well as high levels of crime, including antisocial behaviour and drug use. Around 33% of children live in poverty, considerably higher than the North West average of 19%, while 28% of residents have no formal qualifications, compared with 25% regionally.¹

Previous funding: West End Morecambe Big Local <https://westendmorecambe.co.uk/>

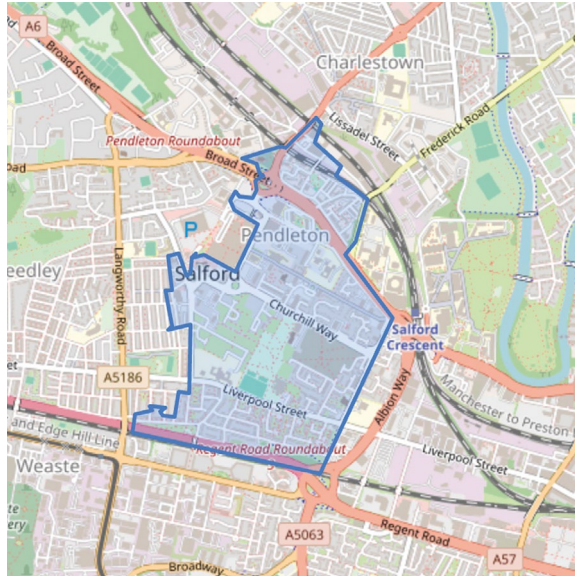
¹ https://www.ivar.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Case-study_Morecambe-Bay.pdf

PENDLETON

Local authority: Salford

Parliamentary constituency: Salford

PiP programme phase: 2



MapIt, © OpenStreetMap contributors. (Map is of the E02001180 MSOA area. Precise PiP boundary to be finalised locally.)

Pendleton is a densely populated urban neighbourhood in Salford with a diverse community, a strong industrial heritage and a location close to Salford city centre. The neighbourhood has a population of approximately 10,000 residents and contains some of the most deprived communities in Salford.

Several LSOAs within Pendleton fall within the most deprived 10% nationally, with deprivation driven by persistent inequalities in income, employment, education, health and living conditions. Around 30% of children live in low-income families, while employment and skills outcomes remain below national averages. Health inequalities are a significant feature of the neighbourhood, with higher levels of limiting long-term illness and lower healthy life expectancy.

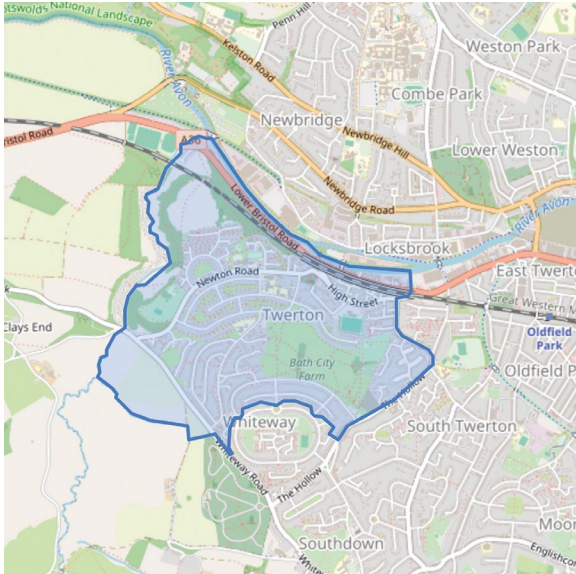
Previous funding: Pendleton Regeneration Scheme, £650 million transformation programme launched in 2013.

TWERTON & WHITEWAY

Local authority: Bath & North East Somerset

Parliamentary constituency: Bath

PiP programme phase: 2



MapIt, © OpenStreetMap contributors. (Map is of the E02002995 MSOA area. Precise PiP boundary to be finalised locally.)

Twerton is a residential neighbourhood in the south-west of Bath with a population of approximately 5,500 residents and experiences higher levels of deprivation compared with many other parts of Bath and North East Somerset. Housing is predominantly made up of post-war estates, social housing and affordable family homes, with some properties requiring improvements in energy efficiency and quality.

Several LSOAs within Twerton fall within the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in England, reflecting inequalities linked to income, employment, education and health. Around 25% of households experience income deprivation, and the area has higher levels of unemployment and economic inactivity than the wider Bath and North East Somerset area.

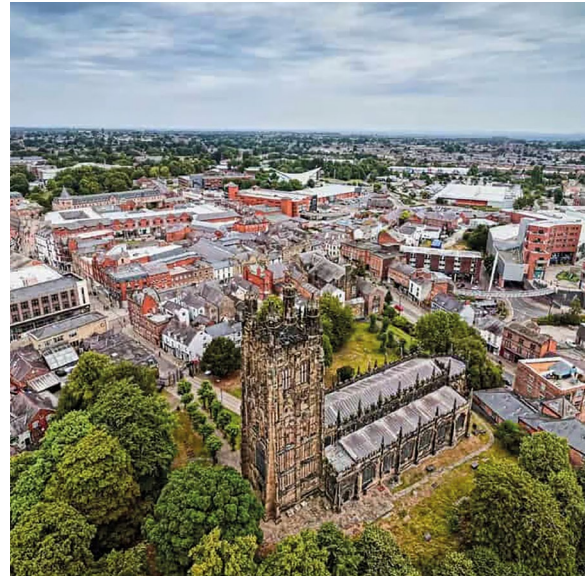
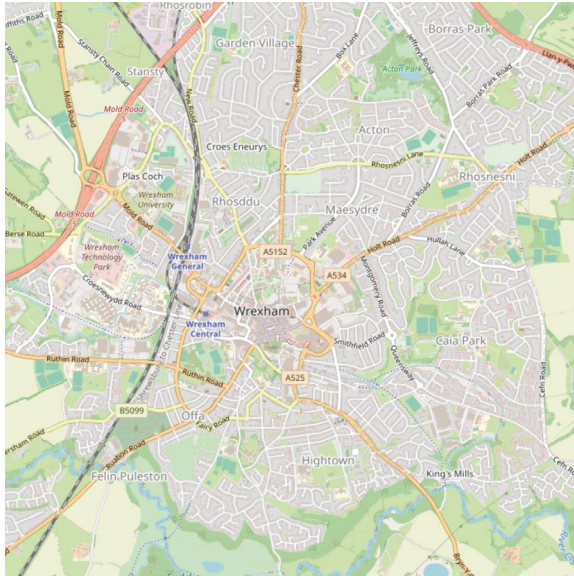
Previous funding: Bath Local High Streets Improvement Scheme (2022–2025) – £450,000.

WREXHAM

Local authority: Wrexham

Parliamentary constituency: Wrexham

PiP programme phase: 1



© OpenStreetMap contributors. (Map is of central Wrexham area. Precise PiP boundary to be finalised locally.) Photo: Joe Bickerton.

Wrexham City Centre is the commercial, cultural and administrative heart of North Wales' newest city, with a population of approximately 8,700 residents. The area combines historic urban character, retail and leisure services, employment opportunities and a growing residential population.

Deprivation is driven by a combination of lower incomes, employment insecurity, health inequalities, housing pressures and barriers to skills and education. The neighbourhood has a more transient and diverse population than many surrounding residential areas, with a higher concentration of private rented accommodation, flats and smaller households.

Previous funding: Welsh Government Transforming Towns programme, through which Wrexham has received more than £10 million for city centre regeneration projects.



Chell Heath is in one of three Pride in Place neighbourhoods in Key City Stoke-on-Trent. Photo: Jon D.

Findings

FINDINGS

The study findings are presented against the three Pride in Place themes: thriving places, stronger communities and taking back control, together with an additional theme around understanding, measuring and sharing evidence of neighbourhood change.

There was broad alignment across the interviews, with many responses proving consistent despite differences in interviewees, governance frameworks and neighbourhood characteristics.

1. Create thriving places: Improving local infrastructure and public spaces

Thriving places were understood as more than physical renewal alone. Improvements to the public realm were framed as part of a broader strategy of neighbourhood transformation, where visible change is expected to sit alongside longer-term social and economic regeneration.

Across the interviews, the creation of “thriving places” tended to be associated both with the higher aim of giving local people agency and with more tangible and visible outcomes, such as improvements to local infrastructure and public spaces. These were viewed as a direct means of driving pride, confidence and everyday use of neighbourhood environments. Interviewees emphasised that investment could generate immediate, tangible change that

residents could see and feel, helping to “lift people’s spirits” and signal renewal in areas that have experienced long-term decline.

The ten-year funding horizon was repeatedly highlighted as critical, enabling more strategic and sustained investment compared with short-term schemes. However, interviewees also noted that expectations around delivery can be shaped by limited public understanding of funding structures and phasing, alongside the need from the beginning to consider mechanisms that might support longer-term community ownership and asset transfer.

1.1 The purpose and promise of Pride in Place

Across the interviews, Pride in Place was framed as a significant opportunity to reset long-standing patterns of disadvantage and disengagement in deprived neighbourhoods. Elected representatives and programme leads described the initiative as a chance to address historic underinvestment, with several highlighting that their areas had been “ignored for a very long time” and required sustained regeneration attention.

“It’s exciting because the schemes that we’re going to take forward aren’t going to be picked by government or the council. They’re actually going to be determined by residents themselves, so they’ll have real control over what happens.” – MP

Alongside physical renewal, there was a strong emphasis on restoring agency,

trust and democratic legitimacy, with the programme seen as a way to rebuild confidence in government and local political institutions.

“It’s an opportunity for one of my areas to regain a feeling of agency... and more widely, it’s an opportunity to rebuild trust in government and in MPs and in democracy.” – MP

Interviewees also stressed its potential to enable meaningful change in places that have experienced fragmented or ineffective regeneration in the past.

“It means that we have an opportunity to invest significantly in an area that has been ignored by previous governments for a very, very long time.” – MP

Pride in Place was contrasted with traditional government funding programmes, which are typically highly centralised and prescriptive and often dictate both priorities and delivery methods. Interviewees recognised that Pride in Place “flips that narrative on its head”:

“Let’s delegate the power down to the lowest possible level and let’s make sure the communities who know the area because they live in those communities... have the ultimate say.” – MP

“It’s about giving faculty to those communities to actually deal with some of their challenges that they live with day to day.” – MP

More broadly, Pride in Place was charac-

terised as aligning with wider local priorities and existing regeneration activity, offering a coordinated and long-term framework through which neighbourhood transformation and civic pride can be advanced.

“Pride in Place probably sums up everything... about our role in my position, but also for the people of [this city].” – MP

The interviews nevertheless suggest a gap between the aspiration of resident-led decision-making and the operational systems needed to support option appraisal, prioritisation and coordinated delivery across multiple stakeholders.

“What you wouldn’t want to do with Pride in Place was start doing something that was already being done. You need to find a way to bring all of these different organisations together.” – MP

There was clear recognition of the importance of ensuring that responsibility for delivery would progressively move towards the community:

“You can see the ambition to really make sure the money gets down into the grassroots.” – Local authority officer

On an individual level, we heard repeatedly that both local authority officers and MPs were personally invested in the programme. Many talked about being local residents themselves or having grown up in the area, and expressed a strong emotional connection and commitment to mak-

ing a difference.

“I suppose I’m there to represent the accountable body, but I’m also there because I care about the place in which I’m employed, and the place I’ve known over a long time.” – Local authority officer

1.2 Visible change and deeper transformation

Investment in community spaces was seen as important, with a number of interviewees describing proposed investment in community spaces or buildings. Although no interview specifically used the term *social infrastructure*, there is therefore a question about how the concept is translated into language that people understand at neighbourhood level. The principle and intent of social infrastructure, in terms of building social capital and creating spaces for connection, were nevertheless clearly recognised.

“Opportunities in creating physical spaces in which people can help each other.” – MP

One opportunity identified was to strengthen smaller community spaces so that they can become more active neighbourhood hubs:

“Is there a way for this to be able to help that very small centre to build capacity, to build activities, to enable it to open for other groups to come into, to offer things down there?” – Local authority officer

There was an understanding that these spaces

were more than simply physical facilities:

“More than just improving the physical environment. It’s about creating spaces where people feel safe and connected and proud to live and work... and still feel like they can walk around in their local area and go to the park.” – Local authority officer

“It’s not just playgrounds that people want. They want lighting, they want bins, they want benches, they want outdoor gym equipment.” – MP

There was also discussion about creating quick wins or signals of change in the first months. In one Pride in Place area, for example, funding was used to support initiatives that residents had identified as important, including a breakfast club and community trips:

“That is already a community-led project because it came from the community saying, ‘We’d really like somewhere for our children to go on their way to school.’” – Local authority officer

Interviewees emphasised that the value of Pride in Place lies in its ability to combine visible, tangible improvements with deeper, less visible structural change. Visible improvements were seen as important for boosting morale and restoring confidence in place through real-world change.

“If you can do stuff that people can see... then I think that’s an opportunity to lift people’s spirits.” – MP

For some interviewees, this visible transformation was itself seen as an important measure of success:

“The biggest success criteria I’m using is visual impact rather than impact data on life changes or life opportunities... the intervention is one that is about visual and a sense of pride rather than incremental change.” – MP

This illustrates an important tension within the programme between early, visible improvements that demonstrate change and build confidence, and the deeper social, economic and institutional transformation that the ten-year programme ultimately seeks to enable.

2. Build stronger communities: Fostering community cohesion and resilience

Across the interviews, building stronger communities was framed as central to Pride in Place, with an emphasis on the process for engaging local residents. Interviewees broadly agreed that regeneration should be community-led, “done with” rather than “done to” residents, with decision-making ideally sitting with neighbourhood boards and local people.

However, there was a clear tension between this aspiration and early-stage practice. There was limited shared understanding of what co-design means in practice, and consultation was often still relatively superficial, with stakeholders sometimes taking a view on what was ‘best’ for the community. Interviewees highlighted

challenges in ensuring inclusive engagement beyond what were perceived as the “usual suspects”, alongside concerns about limited community infrastructure and delivery partners in some areas.

In some areas, the emphasis on establishing new resident-led structures also risked sidelining existing voluntary and community organisations that already possessed relationships, trust and engagement capacity within the neighbourhood. While there was optimism that co-design and long-term funding can strengthen cohesion over time, there was limited evidence at this early stage of it being undertaken meaningfully and consistently.

2.1 Building social capital, connection and resilience

Key factors in building social capital included regular social activities and events, effective leadership and trust-building. There was also an understanding that the funding itself could become a catalyst for bringing different community organisations together. Existing social groups such as churches, ethnic minority organisations and community groups were expected to work together for the wider benefit of the neighbourhood.

“The money will act as a catalyst... It forces people to engage with each other, because if they want some of that money to help their initiative, they have to go to this board. It creates relationships that ordinarily would not exist.” – MP

Participants also recognised that different parts of Pride in Place neighbourhoods possess varying levels of community infrastructure. Some have a concentration of voluntary organisations, while others have fewer established community assets, creating a need both to ensure representation across the whole area and to build capacity where it is weaker.

“We need to make sure we’ve got that balance across the whole area and actually start to build people up in the areas where they haven’t got the same level of community representation.” – MP

An insight arising from years of competitive funding was that organisations had often been encouraged to compete rather than collaborate. One of the programme’s priorities was therefore seen as creating new partnerships that build social capital.

“Everyone’s going for the same pots of money all the time. So there’s almost an inbuilt competitive as opposed to collaborative nature... You need to overcome those difficulties where people see other stakeholders as partners as opposed to competitors.” – MP

2.2 Community engagement and co-design

Community engagement and co-design were not yet consistently operationalised across the study areas. There was broad agreement that Pride in Place must be “done with” communities, not “done to” them, but many places were still at the stage of consultation, surveys, drop-ins or

board recruitment.

“The intention of this was that it will be very much a co-designed, arm’s-length approach... and that the council intervention and direction will be very minimal.” – Local authority officer

The gap is between the language of co-design and the practical machinery for resident-led design, option appraisal, prioritisation and delivery.

“Unless you get the community really on board — that something is done by them, not for them — that is a very important change.” – MP

There was clear recognition among every interviewee of the requirement that Pride in Place be community-led.

“The whole point of it is that the community decides.” – MP

With 284 neighbourhoods participating in a programme of this scale, Pride in Place represents a major opportunity to develop and test methodologies for co-design. But the interviews highlighted a clear tension between the rhetoric of co-design and the practical mechanisms required to deliver it effectively. There was considerable disparity between what interviewees understood co-design to mean and how they expected it to be achieved.

“I’m aware that it’s going to be a real challenging period to actually co-design those plans and to... come out of that with everybody feeling like they’ve been able to

contribute.” – Local authority officer

Interviewees also emphasised that meaningful resident control requires governance structures that enable different voices to be heard, and several rejected tokenistic participation.

“What I don’t want is... tick-box type stuff... This has got to be where the board members play a very active role... not... a nodding exercise because a couple of people have got the loudest voices.” – MP

While there was consensus that Pride in Place should be community-led, with decisions made “by them, not for them”, participants emphasised that achieving genuine co-design requires more than intent. There was no consistent understanding of how it would be operationalised beyond statements of ambition.

“It’s got to be... genuine co-design.” – Local authority officer

In practice, this was not yet being translated consistently into meaningful engagement. Some interviewees also expressed a paternalistic concern that open-ended community engagement might produce low-level or undeliverable proposals:

“There is a terrible tendency to ask communities: what do you love, what do you dislike, what do you want to see change? ... and then you’ve got answers like dog mess on the pavements, more police on our streets, and then the community can’t deliver any of those

changes.” – MP aide

A number of interviewees highlighted the importance of coordinating existing organisations, avoiding duplication or displacement of current activity and ensuring interventions do not replicate existing provision.

“We’re very conscious of not duplicating or displacing. That’s one of the three things we mention when we’re thinking about what we’re doing.” – Local authority officer

Past regeneration had often left a legacy of mistrust and scepticism: investment that looked impressive but was not experienced as being “for us”, or decision-making perceived as being captured by small groups or the “usual suspects”.

“There’s a natural distrust of authorities... somewhere we’ve got to find a way of overcoming that.” – Local authority officer

3. Give residents control: Allowing local communities to shape the future of their neighbourhood

Pride in Place aspires to give residents control over neighbourhood futures through community-led boards and co-designed regeneration plans. In practice, however, early implementation showed a more mediated form of control, with local authorities and MPs often shaping appointments and initial decisions.

Limited capacity, uneven community infrastructure and reliance on established

stakeholders were constraining genuinely resident-led governance in some areas. While the programme expands opportunities for participation and local influence, real control is contingent on trust, sustained support, skills development and inclusive engagement mechanisms that move beyond consultation towards meaningful decision-making power at neighbourhood level.

3.1 Who is in control?

Despite strong stated aspirations towards community empowerment, early decision-making was often being undertaken directly by local authorities and MPs. Of the seven Pride in Place neighbourhoods studied, few had undertaken a fully open election process for board leadership positions, and interviewees described varying approaches to recruitment and appointment.

“(The) Local Council will choose people on the board. Then they will look at capacity building.” – Local authority officer

There was also some lack of confidence that communities could undertake the work, and a tension between the programme’s ambition for deep community-led change and perceived lack of expertise, capacity and track record at neighbourhood level.

“For the regeneration plan... with the best will in the world, people aren’t going to have either the time or probably the expertise to be able to do something detailed.” – MP

Interviewees also recognised that meaningful resident control requires more than representation on a board. Communities require time, skills and support to exercise new responsibilities effectively, particularly where neighbourhoods have never previously exercised this level of authority.

“These are communities that have never had this sort of power before in their life.”
– MP aide

There was sometimes a tendency to understand ‘community power’ primarily at the level of individual residents. Differentiation between the different organisations, groups and interests that make up a community was less developed, and relatively few interviewees initially identified local community organisations as stakeholders in governance.

“We have some very strong community networks, but in terms of people who will turn up and say things and ask for things, it’s the same people. The challenge is how to make it everyone. That’s going to be a huge challenge, because it’s always just been the same people again and again and again.” – MP

In some areas, grassroots organisations were not being directly represented in governance arrangements because of concerns regarding future funding conflicts of interest.

“There’s a whole host of community organisations. We are managing conflicts of interest – a lot of organisations circling

this are looking at accessing the money.” – Local authority officer

There was also a perception in some places that the local community lacked the capacity to work at the scale and scope expected of the programme.

“Expect we will get a lot of quite low-key ideas, e.g. planters in the street, giving the play park a coat of paint.” – Local authority officer

The interviews therefore revealed a shared concern around trust, legitimacy and the limitations of traditional engagement practices in neighbourhood regeneration.

“We have some very strong community networks, but in terms of people who will turn up and say things and ask for things, it’s the same people. So my challenge is how to make it everyone?” – MP

Several participants highlighted an underlying distrust of authorities and the challenge of overcoming historical disengagement in communities where consultation has repeatedly involved “the usual suspects”.

“It’s always just been the same people again and again and again.” – MP

3.2 Building the capacity to exercise community power

Pride in Place is widely seen as a major opportunity, but a central risk is that neighbourhoods are being asked to deliver community-led, durable transformation

without sufficient co-design capability, resources and board capacity. While the programme’s flexibility is seen as positive, it was also described as placing “enormous pressure” on local areas.

This was particularly evident among MPs, who described Pride in Place as requiring a very different form of engagement from conventional constituency casework.

“There’s a complete ability to do whatever you want, which is both wonderful, but actually places enormous pressure.” – MP

There was uncertainty about whether boards would initially possess the appropriate mix of skills and resources.

“Do we have the right skills? Do we have the right resources within the board?” – Local authority officer

Recognising that many residents will not have previous governance experience, interviewees consistently identified capacity building as essential. At the same time, they understood that boards should reflect the community rather than simply becoming forums of people already possessing professional governance expertise. Appropriate support and training were therefore seen as mechanisms for enabling residents to participate confidently rather than reasons to replace them with professionals.

“Your best community person might not have ever done any work like this before... we will put the right support in place... What I don’t want it to become is some

professional outfit... not actual community people who were meant to be talking on Pride in Place.” – MP

Resident control consequently requires investment in governance and capability. Many community members will have little experience of managing large-scale public funding, making training and ongoing support important from the outset.

“We recognise that not everyone has sat on a board. We don’t think any of them have dealt with £20 million of grant funding before. We see ourselves having to do things like training.” – Local authority officer

There were also concerns about whether boards have sufficient resources and access to delivery partners.

“You need to develop some sort of a strategy or training system or support system that provides the boards with the support to be able to meet all of these reporting requirements and also be able to demonstrate the progress that we’re making.” – MP

Some interviewees questioned whether communities would initially have sufficient exposure to the range of possibilities that long-term investment of this scale might support.

The Pride in Place process presents a particular capacity challenge because neighbourhoods are required to develop plans for how the money will be spent while

governance structures, relationships and community capability are themselves still being established.

“As one of my colleagues put it, we need to design, build and drive the car at the same time.” – Local authority officer

There was therefore a strong perception that communities required not simply resources but structured and focused development.

“I think there’s a huge kind of training and development need for those neighbourhood boards to get them from where they will be when they’re constituted to an effective, functioning forum for actually spending that 20 million quid.” – Local authority officer

Overall, there is a tension between local autonomy and capacity. The ability to exercise community power effectively will depend upon strengthening skills, structures, confidence and access to appropriate support over time.

3.3 Accountability, enabling institutions and the transition of power

The interviews highlighted variation in local capacity, delivery structures and the balance between councils and community-led governance within Pride in Place. Most local authorities were considering models in which the council remains the accountable body while delivery is separated, as far as possible, from direct council control.

“The council would act as accountable body, but the intention was that it would be separated as far as possible from the council.” – Local authority officer

This creates an inherent tension between the accountability of the local authority to MHCLG and the requirement that the neighbourhood itself is trusted to lead the programme.

“It’s a real challenge for us to not impose, but to include some robust decision-making mechanisms within those neighbourhood boards. Because that flips back to one of the difficulties with this programme, the council being an accountable body for it.” – Local authority officer

Interviewees noted that the discretion available within current arrangements also creates opportunities for established power structures to shape early decision-making.

“It creates an opportunity for local authorities and power brokers to get someone in who’s particularly pliable.” – MP aide

One interviewee went further, suggesting a potential institutional tension around capacity building itself:

“There’s a fair argument to say that it’s not in the local authority’s interests to equip that community to upskill and to underpin when budgets are really tight and capacity is strained. There may be a personal

interest from officers or departments to try and put their thumb on the scale to ensure that their vision aligns with that of Pride in Place in a given area.” – MP aide

At the same time, the interviews also demonstrated the importance of enabling institutions. In many study areas, local authorities and MPs had identified mediating civic organisations that could play an important role, including VCSE organisations, Citizens Advice and city-level voluntary-sector networks.

“We are very lucky because we’ve already got a lot of charities and not-for-profits operating.” – MP

The MPs interviewed had mostly played a very active role during the preparatory stages and described this as different from their usual constituency work. They were, however, also conscious that their role would need to evolve as neighbourhood boards became established.

“Because the neighbourhood board will then take control of the situation and determine themselves how they want to do things, and I’ll just be there, really to be a guide or an advisor and just help.” – MP

They were also aware of the importance of separating Pride in Place from partisan local politics.

“The biggest risk is that local politics gets in the way.” – MP

Interviewees pointed out that genuine devolution necessarily involves accepting

“Giving communities a say always has a risk. And if you aren’t prepared to embrace that risk, you won’t get the benefits from this opportunity.”

uncertainty and a degree of risk, which can sit uneasily alongside the local authority’s responsibilities as accountable body.

“Giving communities a say always has a risk. And if you aren’t prepared to embrace that risk, you won’t get the benefits from this opportunity.” – MP aide

3.4 Building sustainability through community ownership and assets

There was a clear aspiration for neighbourhood boards to become increasingly independent as their capacity develops.

“...if there are aspirations... within the third or fourth year... how can we build that in so that we could safely and easily transfer... the ownership of it?” – Local authority officer

Interviewees were already considering how to ensure that investment could be sustained beyond the life of the programme, and raised concerns about ‘quick win’

spending that produces only temporary benefits.

“I’ll do the analogy, having a load of flower pots down a road, for instance, very beautiful. But you also know that that’s a one-year revenue implication. And once the money runs out, those flowers wither and die. So what you need is something which is going to create that sustainability.” – MP

A number of different models were being discussed and considered, including transition to a Community Interest Company or another independent community vehicle.

“For the first three years the council acts as accountable body, but we want to use those three years to work out how we sort of transition from it being the funding being held by the council to the funding sitting in some sort of external vehicle, whether that’s a CIC or whatever, so

that it's completely separated from the council." – Local authority officer

Other options under consideration included community land trusts and other models through which capital assets might move into forms of community ownership or governance. Neighbourhoods with previous Big Local experience were particularly likely to refer to these possibilities.

"We've got a community that knows already about community land trusts, that know about asset transfers. With other communities, you've got a year, two, three, four year journey to go on and to expose them in the art of what's possible." – MP aide

At the same time, there is often limited public understanding of funding structures such as capital and revenue spending. Discussion of phasing highlighted that the way money is distributed over time fundamentally shapes delivery capacity and ambition. There were concerns that annual capital allocations could inhibit investment in larger projects such as buildings, or require areas to delay projects while funding accumulates. The capital/revenue split was understood by local authorities and MPs, but interviewees felt community members would not necessarily understand its implications.

"A lot of people don't understand revenue and capital." – MP

Local authorities also raised questions about how their accountable-body respon-

sibilities would operate as neighbourhood governance became more independent.

"The challenges are in local authority procurement and processes. Whilst we stay as an accountable body and we will be supporting that board through at least the first year, 18 months, maybe up to two, three, as we know by year end of year three, it's supposed to be its own thing." – Local authority officer

4. Understand, measure and share neighbourhood change

4.1 Measuring what matters

Most neighbourhoods were already gathering or synthesising information about local need in some form, and some had access to substantial local-authority or public-health datasets. The gap was less the absence of data than the absence of a systematic approach connecting these quantitative sources with resident-generated evidence and using both to establish a longitudinal baseline for the ten-year programme.

MHCLG provided each neighbourhood with a Pride in Place Neighbourhood Profile – government-produced evidence packs prepared by Zencity. These summarise population, deprivation, health, economy, environment, community assets and resident experiences, and were described as useful by most interviewees. But beyond this, few interviewees described plans for establishing a baseline capable of supporting longitudinal evaluation across

the full ten-year programme. Some areas have strong local datasets or public-health dashboards; others have no clear plan yet for measuring impact over ten years. There was also limited awareness of opportunities to compare neighbourhood change across the programme nationally.

“We’ve had conversations about what data gathering will look like and the different strands to it, but there’s no plan in place.”
– MP

Several interviewees warned against simply adding another round of surveys to communities already experiencing consultation or “survey fatigue”.

“I think there’s a high degree of fatigue in terms of being asked about what their priorities are and what they would want to see change in the area that will need to overcome.” – Local authority officer

Amongst the neighbourhoods interviewed, very few yet had a clear plan for how they were going to gather, analyse and use data over the full life of the programme.

“We’re not yet undertaking a specific survey or engagement exercise under the banner of Pride in Place.” – Local authority officer

Interviewees were cautious about overburdening communities with monitoring, and existing data collection was typically limited to informal engagement or surveys rather than being used strategically to inform the programme.

“If it’s like people generally from the community... they’re not going to be experts in gathering data, unless you’re lucky enough to suddenly have some statistician decide to join the neighbourhood board.” – MP

Where there was data gathering, little of it was yet systematic, coordinated or analysed in a way that informed the Pride in Place programme. There was limited evidence of a consistent or shared approach to data gathering across the case-study areas, and limited consideration of how evidence might support comparison and learning between different neighbourhoods. Data-sharing practices were also unclear.

4.2 Sharing learning across the programme

The interviews highlighted uneven learning between Pride in Place neighbourhoods during the early stages of implementation. Despite the replicability and national scale of the programme, neighbourhoods were often developing governance arrangements, engagement approaches and delivery processes largely independently.

“It doesn’t feel like there’s much import from wave one... templates, best practice, things like that.” – MP

This was evident even where several Pride in Place neighbourhoods existed within the same local authority area, including in places where funded neighbourhoods were geographically adjacent. Local authority interviewees described significant varia-

tion between these areas:

“Different working styles, different control and power, different people, different, different everything.” – Local authority officer

None of the interviewees described participation in an established formal network of knowledge exchange specifically connecting Pride in Place neighbourhoods. MPs referred to informal knowledge-sharing through an MPs’ WhatsApp group, while local authority representatives described conversations with neighbouring authorities and participation in emerging programme channels.

The findings suggest a wider opportunity to create more systematic mechanisms through which neighbourhoods can learn from one another without imposing a uniform model of delivery. Different places will necessarily require different approaches, but common challenges around governance, engagement, capacity, co-design, data, procurement and evaluation create considerable scope for shared learning.

This is particularly important because much of the learning generated through Pride in Place will emerge through practice over the ten-year life of the programme. Capturing and sharing that knowledge could enable individual neighbourhoods to benefit from experience elsewhere while also allowing lessons from local delivery to inform the continuing development of the programme nationally.

BEST PRACTICE

This section brings together some examples of best practice identified through the interviews. It highlights the approaches being used across neighbourhoods at this early stage of the programme. The examples are organised around a number of themes, including investing in social infrastructure, working through trusted community organisations, widening participation, giving residents greater influence, planning for sustainability and developing better approaches to understanding and measuring change.

SALFORD: Building stronger communities by working through trusted community organisations

Involving local VCSE organisations as partners rather than creating new engagement mechanisms from scratch.

A consistent theme across the interviews was the importance of working through existing trusted community organisations rather than creating new engagement structures from scratch. Interviewees recognised that many neighbourhoods already possess established relationships, networks and local knowledge that can support community engagement more effectively than externally led approaches. Rather than viewing these organisations simply as delivery partners, they were seen as part of the social infrastructure that underpins thriving places by providing trusted routes into communities and reaching residents who may not otherwise engage with the programme.

Across the case study areas, interviewees identified a wide range of existing organ-

isations that could support delivery, including VCSE organisations, social enterprises, local community centres, family support organisations, youth and activity providers, organisations working with older residents, schools and faith groups. Building on this existing community infrastructure was viewed as both a practical and sustainable way of strengthening neighbourhood participation while avoiding duplication of existing activity.

Salford provides one emerging model. The local authority has appointed Salford CVS to support Pride in Place neighbourhoods with board recruitment and training, secretariat functions and an intensive programme of community engagement. This includes a community researcher and community ambassador model, recruiting local people to help undertake engagement. The approach provides additional capacity while also creating greater distance between the council and the community-led process, supporting neighbourhood boards to develop their own relationships and role within the community.

BEST PRACTICE: BATH

Building stronger communities with inclusive co-design reaching beyond usual participants

Developing co-design engagement methods to ensure residents have genuine opportunities to participate.

Best practice examples highlighted the importance of creating multiple and accessible routes for residents to contribute, recognising that communities are not homogeneous and that different groups engage in different ways. Approaches included distributing leaflets to every household with QR codes, online surveys, door knocking in harder-to-reach streets, community events, school-based engagement, family surveys, and working through voluntary and community organisations. These ap-

proaches helped broaden participation beyond established community representatives and the “usual suspects”.

In Twerton, initial engagement included a ten-day high-street pop-up, delivered in partnership with Curo Housing using a vacant premises that will eventually become a Children’s Centre. The space was launched with a community event involving music, food and family activities and attracted several hundred visitors over the ten days. Alongside the pop-up, the team attended six existing community events, including supper clubs and meetings with local CICs, providing multiple opportunities to raise awareness of Pride in Place, gather initial views and encourage participation in the development of the neighbourhood board.

BEST PRACTICE: WREXHAM

Working with universities as partners to measure what matters

Wrexham provides an emerging example of a wider civic university role. The Pride in Place programme manager is hosted by Wrexham University rather than directly within the local authority, an arrangement intended to provide a greater degree of independence between the council and the community-led governance structure. The university’s Vice-Chancellor was also a founder member of the board.

The university is additionally involved in developing the proposed “Book of

Wrexham”, a data library intended to bring together engagement findings, community insights and local evidence in a common resource. University involvement is intended to provide greater rigour and credibility by helping to review and validate the information collected.

The example demonstrates that the potential contribution of universities extends beyond formal evaluation. A civic university can provide institutional capacity, research expertise, evidence and data capability, and a degree of independence while supporting the development of community-led governance and long-term learning.

BEST PRACTICE: STOKE-ON-TRENT
Developing a robust neighbourhood data system to measure what matters

Developing ways of capturing lived experience so that community evidence can be shared and reused by partners to understand need and impact.

Early work needs to focus on understanding local needs and opportunities through the collection of existing data alongside resident-generated evidence, including previous consultation findings, public-health data, engagement activity, lived experience and insights from earlier regeneration projects. A dedicated data infrastructure can support long-term monitoring and community decision-making, while ensuring that community knowledge is not collected only for individual consultations or reporting requirements but be-

comes an ongoing asset that can inform future decisions.

In Stoke, early work is exploring whether the programme can track changes in residents' sense of connectedness – to their immediate community, the wider neighbourhood, the city and public institutions – rather than measuring project activity alone. A postcard linking to a survey has been distributed to households across the funded area. Existing evidence had identified lack of connectedness as part of the neighbourhood's challenge, creating an opportunity to establish a baseline against which perceptions of connection and engagement could be revisited over time. The work remains at an early stage, but represents an attempt to connect programme activity with longer-term changes in how residents experience their neighbourhood and its institutions.

Consultation

CONSULTATION

The timescale did not permit extensive or in-depth engagement with stakeholders beyond the interviewees, but within the constraints of the remit three consultations took place:

1. Presentation and discussion of preliminary findings at a session of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Key Cities in the House of Commons on 9 June 2026.
2. A questionnaire to KCIN member universities inviting examples of university engagement with Pride in Place projects.
3. A follow-up consultation with MHCLG officials to gain further feedback on the preliminary findings.

The outcome of these consultations is described in this section.

APPG meeting 9 June 2026

The meeting was chaired by the APPG's Chair Rebecca Long-Bailey, MP for Salford and the study authors presented preliminary findings based on interviews in six Pride in Place neighbourhoods which had been completed, and interim recommendations calling for the development of a support platform and operating library to share resources and best practice, supporting neighbourhood boards with guidance and training including on co-design methodologies, clarifying the mediating role of local authorities and promoting involvement of local universities as civic partners.

Reflections were shared by a number of study participants as follows.

Lizzi Collinge MP (Morecambe & Lunesdale)

Lizzi shared her experience with the Pride in Place project in Morecambe West End, emphasising the tension between ambitions for co-design and the timeline. She discussed the governance structure, including the appointment of a board, an expert panel, and a community voice, and highlighted the importance of engaging the community in the real substance of the plan and the challenges of balancing co-design with timely delivery.



The APPG meeting with, from left, Lizzi Collinge MP, Rebecca Long-Bailey MP, the study authors, Andrew Ranger MP and David Williams MP. Photo: Camilla Radwan.

Andrew Ranger MP (Wrexham)

Andrew reflected on Wrexham's experience as a Phase 1 area, noting that governance structures and plans were already in place when he became involved. He praised the

strong partnership between the city board, local authority and other stakeholders, while recognising the pressures councils face managing multiple funding streams and regeneration programmes.

He highlighted strong community engagement, including the “Wrex Factor” initiative, and a focus on involving young people. Wrexham’s flagship Pride in Place project is a proposed Youth Zone, complemented by smaller projects focused on transport, town centre improvements, safety and security.

Andrew noted some tensions with existing organisations that had hoped to access funding, but said the board was committed to delivering additional impact rather than duplicating existing activity. He also emphasised the importance of an independent board identity, separate from the council, to build trust and encourage community participation. Overall, he said Wrexham has now entered the delivery phase and is well placed to share lessons with other areas.

Cleo Newcombe-Jones, Bath & North East Somerset Council

Cleo discussed the council’s commitment to the Pride in Place project and the importance of early-stage engagement. She highlighted the value of working with local stakeholders and institutional partners, such as Bath Spa University, and emphasised the need for a support platform enabling similar-sized cities to engage with

each other and share knowledge and solutions.

Alex Fyans, Salford City Council

Alex welcomed the funding, noting it had provided a strong start to community pride celebrations in Salford as it celebrates the city’s centenary. He reported good progress in establishing governance arrangements, with independent chairs appointed, board recruitment underway, and the first board meeting scheduled for 30 June.

He highlighted the appointment of Salford CVS as a key delivery partner, helping to build trust with local communities, support engagement, and develop Pride in Place plans. He noted that the main challenge ahead will be turning community enthusiasm into meaningful plans and welcomed additional support for co-design and engagement.

Discussion

MHCLG officials present provided feedback on the study and noted the importance of supporting local authorities and communities in their capacity-building efforts. Jim highlighted the variation in capacity and starting points across the programme and the need for more guidance and templates to support local authorities. They emphasised the nature of Pride in Place as a ten-year programme to build community empowerment and capacity over time, and the importance of walking alongside places to provide the necessary tools.

MHCLG is committed to providing additional support and resources, including a Network for Neighbourhoods to share information and learn from each other.

Participants raised questions about the governance structure, the role of local authorities, and the importance of inclusive community engagement.

Professor Nicky Marsh of the University of Southampton highlighted the need for diverse and representative boards and the importance of developing community researchers and advocates.

Participants discussed the challenges of balancing community-led delivery with accountability and the potential risks of creating disparity between adjoining neighbourhoods.

Adam Fox of Colchester City Council highlighted the importance of maintaining broad community involvement beyond the board itself. Recognising that not everyone who wanted to participate could be appointed to the board, his area has established a residents' panel, alongside planned business and youth panels, to create ongoing channels for engagement and feedback. He said these structures will help address concerns about transparency, ensure information flows between the board and the wider community, and support meaningful participation throughout the programme's ten-year lifespan.

Universities

Universities have a significant role in place policy and potentially in the delivery of Pride in Place, both through academic research and through their wider civic engagement. As noted in the literature review, university-led research has materially advanced understanding of lived experience, place identity, belonging, health inequalities and the conditions required for sustainable regeneration. Just as important is the contribution universities can make in applying that knowledge: evaluating interventions, supporting community engagement, convening partners, strengthening evidence and helping places understand change over time.

To explore this further, the study team circulated a short questionnaire to member universities of the Key Cities Innovation Network, inviting examples of relevant research and any direct engagement with Pride in Place projects. The exercise was not intended to be comprehensive, and only a small number of responses were received. It nevertheless provided useful illustrations of the different forms a civic-university contribution can take.

Some universities are already directly involved in Pride in Place governance. At Bath Spa University, a member of the university's Inclusive Communities team is co-chair of the Twerton Pride in Place board. At the University of Salford, the Deputy Dean of its Health faculty sits on the Pendleton Pride in Place board, alongside a

wider body of university research relevant to neighbourhood change, including work on active travel and social inclusion, urban greening, community use of town-centre space and the relationship between major cultural institutions and surrounding communities. The University of Essex is contributing specialist health expertise in Clacton, where Dr Emily T Murray leads the Pride in Place board's health subgroup and another Essex academic serves alongside her. Murray's wider research on young people in deprived coastal communities, housing, educational outcomes and mental health provides an evidence base directly relevant to the challenges faced by coastal neighbourhoods.

Other responses highlighted the value of existing research and civic partnerships that could be mobilised as Pride in Place develops. The University of Lincoln identified work across Greater Lincolnshire spanning health inequalities and serious violence in Skegness, youth services and vulnerability, substance use and recovery, and community-facing arts, heritage and public-realm projects in Boston and Spalding. This involves partnerships with local authorities, police and public-health bodies, voluntary organisations and community groups. The university is also represented on the Connected Coast board covering Skegness, illustrating how established civic relationships and governance experience can provide institutional continuity across successive place-based programmes. The consultation also identified a role for

universities in developing the knowledge infrastructure around Pride in Place. At the University of Southampton, research into neighbourhoods, identity and lived experience is being translated into a cross-sector **Neighbourhoods and Data** process involving researchers, practitioners, data specialists and policymakers. The first workshop, held in May 2026, examined how quantitative evidence can be combined with lived and felt experience to help communities articulate need, establish meaningful baselines and understand the impact of investment. It identified needs around community and VCSE data capability, accessible neighbourhood data infrastructure and external expertise to support neighbourhood decision-making. A second and final workshop in September will review and refine the recommendations and translate them into policy briefs for local authorities and communities establishing neighbourhood boards.

The examples also sit within a wider body of university work on the challenges facing different types of place. Research led by the University of Plymouth into coastal communities, for example, has highlighted the particular economic, social and health inequalities experienced by many coastal places, as explored in the earlier Key Cities report **On the Waterfront**. This illustrates the potential to connect neighbourhoods not only to their nearest university, but also to specialist expertise and learning from places elsewhere facing comparable challenges.

Taken together, these examples suggest that there is no single university role in Pride in Place. Civic universities can contribute as board members and trusted local partners; sources of specialist research and evidence; evaluators; convenors; providers of community-research capability; and brokers of learning between neighbourhoods and national policy. Their value need not depend on being physically located within a Pride in Place boundary: existing civic relationships may extend across wider geographies, while specialist expertise can connect neighbourhoods facing common challenges such as coastal disadvantage, health inequalities, youth opportunity or weak community infrastructure.

The limited consultation therefore points not to a new role that needs to be invented from scratch, but to a distributed body of existing civic capability that could be connected more systematically to Pride in Place. Used well, universities can complement rather than displace community knowledge and agency, helping neighbourhoods understand their starting point, make informed choices, build capacity and capture learning over the ten-year life of the programme.

MHCLG consultation

Following the APPG discussion, the study team held a further consultation with senior MHCLG officials to test the emerging findings and recommendations against the Department's experience of implementing Pride in Place.

Officials broadly endorsed the direction of the interim findings, noting that many of the recommendations reflected issues already recognised within the Department and areas where further support was being developed. In particular, they agreed that a central challenge is the tension between the programme's ambition for community-led delivery and the pressure for rapid, visible progress. Capacity building was identified as the critical bridge between these two objectives, enabling local authorities and MPs progressively to step back as neighbourhood boards become more capable and independent.

The discussion also reinforced concerns about the early balance of power within the programme. MHCLG acknowledged that, in some places, local authorities and MPs were playing an outsized role during the preparatory phase and that this could risk squeezing out community organisations and local voices. Officials emphasised the importance of working through trusted local networks and existing community assets rather than assuming that new structures alone would generate genuine community power.

A further area of alignment concerned co-design. MHCLG confirmed that it was seeking to move places beyond conventional consultation towards more participatory and deliberative approaches, including through an engagement toolkit developed with Ipsos following pilots in 13 Pride in Place areas. Officials recognised, however, that co-design is difficult to do well and

that the places most in need of support may also be the least likely to make effective use of optional guidance without additional intervention.

The consultation also highlighted the need for clearer and more accessible programme support. While MHCLG had already provided fact sheets, webinars, teach-ins and other guidance to boards, MPs and local authorities, officials recognised that this material was still relatively fragmented while the planned Network for Neighbourhoods was being established. They saw value in clearer articulation of the enabling role of local authorities and in sharing examples of good practice across the programme.

Data and evaluation emerged as another significant area of common concern. MHCLG officials acknowledged the limitations of relying on existing deprivation measures alone and the difficulty of establishing meaningful neighbourhood-level baselines across a programme of this scale. The discussion explored the need to combine quantitative evidence with lived experience and community-generated data, while avoiding excessive monitoring burdens on neighbourhoods.

In this context, officials expressed particular interest in the potential role of universities as civic partners. They recognised that universities could contribute to baselines, evaluation, participatory research, data interpretation and programme learning, and invited further thinking from the study team on how such a role might

operate locally and how activity across different places could contribute to programme-level learning.

The discussion therefore provided broad validation of the principal issues identified through the fieldwork while also clarifying where MHCLG was already developing responses. It reinforced the case for focusing the final recommendations on practical support for community capacity, clearer co-design methodologies, stronger knowledge-sharing, proportionate approaches to evaluation, and the enabling role of local authorities, universities and other civic partners.



Colchester Academy is in Greenstead, a Pride in Place neighbourhood in Key City Colchester. Photo © Paul Wishart.

Discussion

DISCUSSION

Hundreds of neighbourhoods across the UK are beginning one of the largest experiments in the devolution of public funding at a hyperlocal scale. This study followed the early transition from arrangements largely shaped by local authorities and MPs towards the community-led model intended by Pride in Place, during the period in which Phase 2 areas were establishing neighbourhood boundaries, appointing chairs and beginning to form their boards. The discussion below considers the findings through the three principal Pride in Place objectives, alongside the cross-cutting issue of understanding and measuring neighbourhood change, and relates them to the policy and literature reviewed earlier in this report.

Overall, there was a genuine and consistent view among interviewees that Pride in Place represented the right direction for neighbourhood policy and a potentially important shift towards community-led regeneration in places experiencing long-term disadvantage. Its ten-year horizon, non-competitive allocation and emphasis on community agency were widely welcomed. At the same time, the early implementation of the programme reveals a gap between programme ambition and delivery capability. Interviewees strongly supported community empowerment, long-term neighbourhood regeneration and resident-led decision-making, but the practical mechanisms required to achieve these aims — including co-design, governance, capacity-building, knowledge-sharing and

evaluation — remain unevenly developed.

The principal challenge at this early stage is therefore not whether the objectives of Pride in Place command support, but how the structures and capabilities required to realise them are developed. The findings suggest that devolving funding is a necessary but insufficient condition for devolving power. Community agency depends on residents having the knowledge, confidence, relationships, time and organisational capacity to exercise meaningful influence, and on the institutions around them being able to support that process without taking control of it.

Thriving places

Place-based programmes seek not only to improve physical conditions but also to strengthen belonging, pride and connection to local environments (Manzo & Perkins, 2006). The Pride in Place findings reflect this wider understanding, with interviewees describing investment in public spaces, community facilities and infrastructure as important mechanisms for rebuilding confidence and signalling that places previously perceived as neglected are valued.

The findings also reinforce a longstanding challenge within place-based regeneration policy: visible environmental improvements can be easier to deliver and measure than deeper social transformation. Early interventions can provide important evidence that change is taking place and

can help build confidence in a programme. However, physical projects are unlikely on their own to achieve the longer-term aims of stronger communities and increased community power. The strongest approaches identified in the study combined physical investment with attention to how spaces would be used, managed and sustained, and to the organisations and relationships that would support activity within them.

This is particularly important over a ten-year programme. The long funding horizon was widely regarded as a major strength and creates opportunities to move beyond short-term projects towards assets and institutions capable of supporting neighbourhood activity over the longer term. Community land trusts, community interest companies and other forms of community ownership were identified as possible mechanisms for creating durable local benefit. Yet capacity to establish and manage such arrangements differs substantially between neighbourhoods. Some areas can build on previous programmes such as Big Local and established community organisations; others are beginning with much weaker civic infrastructure.

The programme therefore needs to recognise differences in neighbourhood starting points. Equal financial allocations do not in themselves provide equal capacity to make effective use of those resources. Supporting sustainable transformation requires investment not only in projects and physical assets, but also in the communi-

ty capability required to develop, manage and steward them.

Stronger communities and social infrastructure

The shift in place-based policy towards neighbourhoods recognises the importance of the everyday places in which people live and the role of social infrastructure. Neighbourhood decline is often associated with weakened networks, reduced trust and declining opportunities for social interaction (Forrest & Kearns, 2001). Conversely, investment in community spaces, organisations and activities can create the weak ties that connect residents beyond immediate networks and support collective action (Granovetter, 1973).

The study findings demonstrate recognition of this principle, although interviewees rarely used the term “social infrastructure”. They described community centres, parks, local groups, cultural activity and informal gathering places as spaces in which people could connect, support one another and develop a stronger sense of belonging. In some cases, the funding itself was seen as a potential catalyst for new relationships by creating a reason for organisations and residents to work together.

There is, however, an important risk in assuming that a new neighbourhood board necessarily creates community capacity. Existing grassroots and voluntary organisations are often repositories of trust, local knowledge and relationships built over

many years. Creating new governance structures without first understanding this existing civic ecology can inadvertently bypass or weaken precisely the capacity on which community-led regeneration depends. The task is therefore not simply to establish new structures, but to connect them effectively with the organisations, networks and informal leadership already present in neighbourhoods.

This is consistent with recent JRF analysis suggesting that many Pride in Place neighbourhoods combine high deprivation with particularly weak levels of community participation and social infrastructure, reinforcing the importance of recognising very different starting points for community-led delivery (Hunter & Ibison, 2026).

Co-design is central to this process. Interviewees frequently expressed support for it, but the research found considerable variation in what was understood by the term and in the capability available to put it into practice. In some cases, proposed engagement remained close to conventional consultation: asking residents what they wanted and then relying on institutions to determine how those priorities should be translated into delivery. Genuine co-design requires a more sustained process in which residents are involved in understanding problems, considering options, making choices and reviewing their consequences.

The detailed guidance for Phase 2 ten-year visions published by MHCLG in August

2026 reinforces this direction, requiring neighbourhoods to explain how community engagement has shaped their priorities and proposed approach, and how residents will continue to be involved as plans develop and are delivered. The guidance also asks places to consider community-led delivery, local capacity, partnership working, governance, monitoring and adaptation. This strengthens the formal expectations around community involvement, but also reinforces the importance of ensuring that neighbourhoods have the practical capacity, methods and support required to translate these expectations into meaningful co-design.

Community-led does not therefore mean that neighbourhoods should be expected to operate in isolation. Decisions made at neighbourhood scale interact with housing markets, transport systems, public services, adjacent communities and wider local and regional economies. Effective co-design needs to combine lived experience and community knowledge with access to evidence, professional expertise and wider spatial understanding. Local authorities, universities, businesses, voluntary organisations and other civic partners can contribute to that process without displacing community agency. Their role is to expand the knowledge, options and connections available to neighbourhoods, rather than to determine their priorities.

The findings consequently point towards a need for practical support for co-design and community capacity-building, includ-

ing methods for reaching beyond established participants, recognising existing grassroots organisations, supporting community researchers and developing the governance skills required to turn local priorities into deliverable and sustainable activity.

Give residents control

The literature identifies a long-term shift in regeneration policy from top-down intervention towards community power, recognising residents as holders of knowledge and expertise rather than passive recipients of intervention (Taylor, 2000). Evidence from programmes including New Deal for Communities and Big Local suggests that community involvement can strengthen local capability, legitimacy and responsiveness (Crisp et al., 2023).

The findings strongly reflect this ambition. MPs and local authority interviewees repeatedly emphasised that Pride in Place should not become another council programme and that neighbourhoods should have genuine influence over investment decisions. However, the findings also expose the difficulty of translating this principle into practice. At this early stage, many of the decisions required to establish the programme — boundaries, chair appointments, governance processes, data management and administrative arrangements — have necessarily been mediated by local authorities, MPs and other established actors. Participation does not automatically amount to power.

This creates a recurring tension between empowerment and administration. Pride in Place seeks to transfer influence towards neighbourhoods while simultaneously requiring appropriate stewardship of substantial public funds. Local authorities remain accountable bodies and possess much of the financial, procurement, legal and delivery expertise required by the programme. The question is therefore not whether they should be involved, but how their role evolves from control towards enablement as community capacity develops.

A similar issue arises for MPs. Pride in Place gives local parliamentarians an unusually direct role in the establishment of neighbourhood governance. The interviews showed different approaches to that responsibility, but also a recurring recognition that the MP's longer-term role should be to support, convene, advocate and help remove barriers rather than determine neighbourhood priorities. This requires a different relationship with place-based funding from one in which elected representatives principally champion projects or negotiate allocations. It also reinforces the importance of clarity about the respective roles of boards, MPs and accountable local authorities as the programme matures.

Community empowerment therefore requires capability on both sides of the relationship. Residents and board members may require support in governance, finance, procurement, data, community engagement and project development. But local authorities and MPs may also need

support in co-design, facilitation and the practical implications of relinquishing institutional control. The evidence suggests that some of the programme's most difficult capacity-building challenges will lie not within communities alone, but in changing the behaviours and working practices of the institutions around them.

The findings also indicate that the transition towards greater community control should not be understood as a simple transfer from one organisation to another. Effective community governance requires a middle ground between communities and institutions, supported by trusted intermediaries, shared learning and access to expertise (Geddes, 1998; Taylor, 2000). The aim should be progressively to strengthen the ability of neighbourhoods to make informed decisions while maintaining the partnerships needed to connect neighbourhood priorities with wider systems and opportunities.

Measuring what matters

The programme's ten-year funding model creates an important opportunity for experimentation, learning and adaptation. It also creates a requirement to understand whether neighbourhoods are changing over time and why.

The literature highlights significant challenges in measuring place-based change because concepts such as pride, belonging and attachment are relational and experienced differently across communities

(Howcroft et al., 2025; Marsh et al., 2025). Traditional evaluation approaches tend to privilege measurable outputs, potentially overlooking changes in trust, identity, relationships, confidence and community capacity. Measures of success therefore need to capture lived experience, social infrastructure and community resilience alongside economic, physical and service outcomes.

The findings suggest that this element of the programme is currently underdeveloped. Limited or inconsistent baseline data, different approaches to monitoring and uncertainty over future data ownership create difficulties in determining whether Pride in Place is increasing participation, trust, agency or quality of life. Simply monitoring expenditure, projects or movement in broad indices such as the IMD will not provide an adequate account of neighbourhood transformation. Nor will measures of pride or attachment alone demonstrate whether underlying conditions have changed.

There is therefore a need to combine quantitative indicators with community-generated evidence, qualitative research and longitudinal understanding of how change is experienced locally. Lived experience should be treated as evidence rather than supplementary commentary (Madgin & Howcroft, 2024; Taylor, 2000). At the same time, locally generated approaches need sufficient commonality and methodological robustness to enable credible learning across a national programme. The

challenge is to establish shared principles and learning questions without imposing a uniform evaluation model that removes the local specificity at the heart of Pride in Place.

This is also an area in which universities can make a distinctive civic contribution. The study identified examples of universities already supporting local data, evidence and programme development. Their potential role extends beyond formal evaluation to participatory research, community-researcher training, data governance, facilitation and long-term learning. As institutions with long-term relationships to place and the ability to connect local evidence to wider knowledge, universities could help neighbourhoods develop their own evidence base while enabling learning to be shared across the programme.

From programme ambition to delivery capability

Taken together, the findings suggest four closely related requirements if Pride in Place is to realise its ambition.

First: community power requires capacity. Establishing a neighbourhood board and allocating funding does not by itself create the conditions for meaningful resident control. Capacity-building, co-design and inclusive engagement need to be treated as core programme infrastructure rather than preparatory activity.

Second: community power needs enabling institutions. Local authorities, MPs, uni-

versities, voluntary organisations and professional partners continue to have important roles, but those roles need to strengthen rather than substitute for community agency. This requires clarity about responsibilities and, in some cases, changes in institutional practice.

Third: neighbourhood transformation requires connection as well as local control. Neighbourhoods sit within wider places and systems. Community-led decisions will be stronger where residents can draw on wider evidence, expertise, partnerships and learning while retaining control over their own priorities.

Fourth: a ten-year programme requires a ten-year learning infrastructure. Baselines, longitudinal evaluation, peer learning, knowledge-sharing and the systematic identification of effective practice need to be established early enough to inform delivery, rather than reconstructed retrospectively.

These conclusions lead directly to the recommendations that follow: strengthening support for co-design and board capability; clarifying the enabling and mediating role of local authorities and MPs; recognising and working through existing grassroots and civic infrastructure; supporting sustainable community ownership and stewardship; creating mechanisms for national knowledge exchange; and developing shared approaches to evidence and evaluation, including a stronger civic role for universities.

Pride in Place represents the latest stage in a long evolution of UK place policy, moving from centrally driven regeneration towards devolution, partnership and community agency. Its significance lies not simply in the scale or duration of investment, but in its attempt to change how neighbourhood regeneration is designed and delivered. The wider policy implication from these early findings is that devolution of funding is not the same as devolution of power. Pride in Place provides an opportunity to test a different model of neighbourhood regeneration, but its success will depend on whether institutions can enable rather than direct, whether communities develop the capacity to exercise meaningful influence, and whether the programme builds the governance, partnerships and evidence needed to sustain community-led change over time.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS

Early recommendations were presented to the Key Cities APPG, with feedback received from participating local authorities, parliamentarians, universities and MHCLG. The recommendations below draw together the findings from the seven study neighbourhoods, the policy and literature reviews and this subsequent consultation.

They are intended to support the programme as it develops rather than prescribe a uniform model. Pride in Place is deliberately locally led, and neighbourhoods begin from very different positions. The aim should therefore be to strengthen the capability, relationships and learning infrastructure that allow local communities to exercise meaningful agency while retaining the flexibility to develop approaches appropriate to their own circumstances.

These recommendations also recognise support already being developed by MHCLG, including the forthcoming Network for Neighbourhoods. They are intended both to inform those arrangements and to identify areas where existing civic, academic, community and specialist networks can contribute complementary capability, including where support is required before the Network is fully operational.

1. Invest in the practice and methodology of co-design

Finding: Community-led regeneration requires more than consultation. The study found strong support for co-design but considerable variation in what the term meant in practice and in the capacity available to undertake it. Conventional consultation processes can reproduce existing inequalities in knowledge, confidence and institutional power rather than redistribute influence towards communities.

Recommendation: Building on MHCLG's Community Engagement Toolkit and the guidance now provided on the preparation of Pride in Place Plans, the programme should develop, through the Network for Neighbourhoods and specialist partners, a practical co-design and community-capacity support offer that helps neighbourhood boards and their partners move beyond consultation towards meaningful shared decision-making.

This should include support for the process and methodology of co-design itself: how problems are framed; whose knowledge counts; how residents participate in developing and assessing options; how lived experience, professional expertise and wider evidence are brought together; and how decisions are made transparently where interests differ. Particular attention should be given to methods that address existing power imbalances and reach people who are less likely to participate through established consultation processes.

“The aim is to strengthen the capability, relationships and learning infrastructure that allow communities to exercise meaningful agency.”

Support could include facilitation, community-researcher training, methods for reaching beyond established participants, approaches to translating community priorities into deliverable projects, and case studies of effective practice. Neighbourhood boards should be encouraged to develop proportionate community engagement and co-design plans which distinguish between visible early activity and the longer-term work required to build community confidence, capability and agency.

Given its scale and ten-year duration, Pride in Place also offers an important opportunity to develop and test better methodologies for community co-design, creating transferable learning for future place-based policy.

2. Build from existing community capacity rather than around it

Finding: Existing voluntary, community and grassroots organisations often hold

substantial local trust, relationships, knowledge and delivery experience. New governance structures can nevertheless inadvertently bypass or displace this existing social and civic infrastructure.

Recommendation: Neighbourhood boards should begin by understanding the community capacity already present in their area through proportionate asset and civic-capacity mapping, identifying community organisations, informal networks and leadership, existing partnerships, social infrastructure and previous neighbourhood initiatives.

Government guidance and support should encourage boards and their partners to work with trusted local organisations and intermediaries rather than create parallel structures where effective capacity already exists. Procurement, commissioning and partnership arrangements should also enable grassroots organisations to partici-

pate without imposing requirements disproportionate to their size and resources.

The objective should not be to preserve existing arrangements uncritically, but to ensure that new community power builds on local relationships and knowledge rather than inadvertently weakening them.

3. Support the evolving roles of local authorities and MPs

Finding: Pride in Place creates an inherent tension between community autonomy and institutional accountability. During the programme's establishment, local authorities and MPs necessarily play significant roles in enabling governance and delivery, while the longer-term ambition is for communities themselves progressively to exercise greater control.

Recommendation: MHCLG should provide clearer guidance and capacity-building around the evolving roles of local authorities and MPs as neighbourhood capability develops.

In the early stages, local authorities have important responsibilities as accountable bodies and sources of financial, legal, procurement and delivery expertise. Where neighbourhood boards subsequently develop into CICs, charities, co-operatives or other independent structures, some formal accountable-body responsibilities may reduce or transfer. This should not imply withdrawal from the relationship. The longer-term role of local authorities can develop towards that of enabler, strategic

connector, partner and source of professional expertise, helping communities connect neighbourhood priorities with wider public services, infrastructure, adjacent neighbourhoods and place strategies.

Similarly, the role of MPs can evolve from helping establish the programme towards championing neighbourhoods, convening relationships, connecting local experience to national policy and helping remove barriers to delivery, while respecting the principle that local priorities should be determined by communities themselves.

Capacity-building should therefore not focus solely on residents and board members. Local authorities, parliamentarians and other partners may also require support in co-design, facilitation and the practical implications of transferring power while sustaining productive long-term relationships.

4. Plan for long-term stewardship, not only project delivery

Finding: The ten-year funding horizon was widely regarded as a major strength, but lasting transformation will depend on whether investment creates sustainable community assets, institutions and capability rather than a succession of projects dependent on continued grant funding.

Recommendation: Pride in Place Plans should consider whole-life sustainability and stewardship from the outset. Neighbourhood boards should be supported to consider who will use, manage and maintain assets; what social activity and

revenue support will be required; and whether models such as community ownership, CICs, community land trusts, asset transfer and income-generating uses can strengthen longer-term community independence.

Physical investment and social infrastructure should be considered together. A community building, park or public space has greater potential for lasting impact where there are organisations, activities and resources capable of animating and sustaining it.

Government should also keep the annual profile and capital/revenue balance of programme funding under review where these arrangements unnecessarily constrain larger strategic projects that have strong community support, robust governance and a credible long-term business case. The objective should be to retain appropriate financial control while enabling communities to make full use of the advantages offered by a ten-year programme.

5. Use the Network for Neighbourhoods to build shared learning and practical support

Finding: Pride in Place is being implemented simultaneously across hundreds of neighbourhoods, many of which are addressing similar questions around governance, engagement, procurement, capacity, data and delivery. The study found consid-

erable appetite for learning between places but limited systematic infrastructure through which knowledge and effective practice can currently be shared.

Recommendation: MHCLG should use the emerging Network for Neighbourhoods as the principal vehicle for shared learning and practical support across Pride in Place, informed by the early needs identified through this study.

The Network should preserve local autonomy while avoiding hundreds of neighbourhoods independently solving similar problems. Its offer should include peer learning, thematic networks, training and mentoring, access to specialist expertise and a practical operating library containing resources such as board role descriptions, codes of conduct, engagement and co-design frameworks, decision-making templates, option-appraisal tools, procurement guidance, and examples of investment plans and governance arrangements.

Knowledge exchange should connect neighbourhoods by shared characteristics and challenges as well as geography. Useful groupings could include coastal communities, post-industrial neighbourhoods, market towns, areas with weaker civic infrastructure and local authorities containing several Pride in Place neighbourhoods.

The Network should itself operate iteratively: capturing experience from neighbourhoods as delivery develops, testing approaches, identifying effective practice and

feeding learning back into the programme rather than treating guidance as fixed at the outset.

Where immediate support needs arise before the Network is fully operational, MHCLG should make use of existing community, civic, professional and academic networks capable of providing appropriate bridging support.

6. Measure what matters and mobilise universities as civic partners

Finding: A ten-year neighbourhood programme requires an evidence and learning framework capable of understanding not only projects and outputs but changes in trust, agency, belonging, social infrastructure, opportunity and lived experience.

Finding: Baseline and evaluation capability is currently uneven, while universities already possess relevant research expertise, civic relationships and long-term institutional presence in many places.

Recommendation: Pride in Place should establish a proportionate neighbourhood baseline and longitudinal learning framework, combining shared quantitative measures with qualitative and community-generated evidence.

Build confidence in the role of qualitative evidence by recognising lived experience and community-generated data as important components of understanding programme impact, and embed the VCSE sector appropriately in local data-gathering

and insight processes.

Common principles should enable credible learning across the programme without imposing a rigid national template. Approaches should address data governance and ownership, participatory evaluation, and measures of community capacity, trust, agency, attachment and social infrastructure alongside physical, economic and service outcomes.

Universities should be mobilised as civic partners in this work. Depending on local need and capacity, their contribution could include baseline development, data interpretation, participatory research, community-researcher training, evaluation design, facilitation, specialist advice and long-term learning. Their role should not be limited to retrospective evaluation: they can help communities use evidence in developing plans and making decisions throughout the programme.

Government should work through the Network for Neighbourhoods, civic university networks and other partners to connect neighbourhoods with appropriate academic expertise and develop mechanisms through which locally generated evidence can contribute to programme-level learning and longer-term evaluation.

The contribution of Key Cities and KCIN

The Key Cities family can contribute to the practical development and testing of these recommendations.

With 45 Pride in Place neighbourhoods across member authorities, established relationships between local government, parliamentarians and civic universities, and experience of cross-place policy and knowledge exchange, Key Cities and the Key Cities Innovation Network provide a potential testbed for approaches that could subsequently benefit the wider programme.

This could include piloting co-design and board-development support; developing neighbourhood baseline and evaluation approaches; convening thematic peer-learning groups; connecting neighbourhoods with civic university partners; and producing case studies, methodologies and practical resources for wider dissemination.

Such activity should complement rather than duplicate the Network for Neighbourhoods. Key Cities and KCIN could provide a practical testbed and partner for particular elements of the wider support offer, developing and testing approaches across a substantial and diverse cohort of neighbourhoods and sharing transferable learning with MHCLG, the Network for Neighbourhoods and neighbourhoods nationally.

The purpose would be to use the existing relationships and capability of the network to support the Government's wider ambition for Pride in Place and contribute to the continuing development of effective neighbourhood practice, with useful learning made available beyond the Key Cities network.

Future work

This study captures Pride in Place during its formative stage, before most Phase 2 neighbourhood boards were fully established and before substantive delivery had begun. It has therefore necessarily examined the conditions being created for community power rather than whether that power is ultimately exercised successfully.

A second phase of research could examine whether the programme's early ambition to transfer agency to communities is being realised in practice. Priorities could include direct research and co-design with residents and board members; longitudinal measures of community power, trust, attachment and neighbourhood change; follow-up research in the seven study areas as governance and delivery mature; and extension of the study to a wider cohort of Pride in Place neighbourhoods.

Particular value would come from following a cohort of neighbourhoods through the ten-year programme, enabling the research to examine not only whether neighbourhood transformation occurs, but which approaches, relationships, forms of capacity and models of co-design enable it to happen.

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Redbridge Towers is in Redbridge & Millbrook West, a Pride in Place neighbourhood in Key City Southampton. Photo © Paul Wishart.

Appendices

APPENDIX 1: PRIDE IN PLACE NEIGHBOURHOODS IN KEY CITIES

Neighbourhood	Phase	Local authority	MP	Constituency	KCIN university
Twerton	2	Bath & North East Somerset	Wera Hobhouse	Bath	Bath Spa
West Howe	2b	Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole	Jessica Toale	Bournemouth West	
Boscombe West	2b	Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole	Tom Hayes	Bournemouth East	
Hamworthy West	2b	Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole	Neil Duncan-Jordan	Poole	
Keighley	1	Bradford	Robbie Moore	Keighley	Bradford
Holme Wood	2	Bradford	Judith Cummins	Bradford South	Bradford
Ravenscliffe	2	Bradford	Imran Hussain	Bradford East	Bradford
Greenstead	2	Colchester	Pam Cox	Colchester	Essex
Binley & Willenhall	2	Coventry ¹	Mary Creagh	Coventry East	Coventry
Tile Hill	2b	Coventry ¹	Taiwo Owatemi	Coventry North West	Coventry
Hillfields	2b	Coventry ¹	Mary Creagh	Coventry East	Coventry
Raffles & Morton	2	Cumberland	Julie Minns	Carlisle	
Flimby, Ellenborough & Broughton Moor	2	Cumberland	Markus Campbell-Savours	Workington	
Mirehouse, Kells & Woodhouse	2	Cumberland	Josh MacAlister	Whitehaven & Workington	
Heavitree East & Wipton South	2b	Exeter	Steve Race	Exeter	
Matson & Robinswood	2b	Gloucester	Alex McIntyre	Gloucester	
Orchard Park	2	Hull	Diana Johnson	Kingston upon Hull North	

¹ While Coventry is not currently a member of the Key Cities group, Coventry University is a longstanding and active member of KCIN

Neighbourhood	Phase	Local authority	MP	Constituency	KCIN university
Greatfield	2	Hull	Karl Turner	Kingston upon Hull East	
Boulevard & St Andrew's Quay	2	Hull	Emma Hardy	Kingston upon Hull West & Hessle	
Morecambe West End	2	Lancaster	Lizzi Collinge	Morecambe & Lunesdale	Lancaster
Birchwood West	2	Lincoln	Hamish Falconer	Lincoln	Lincoln
Luton	2b	Medway	Tris Osborne	Chatham and Aylesford	
Twydall	2b	Medway	Naushabah Khan	Gillingham & Rainham	
Rede Common	2b	Medway	Lauren Edwards	Rochester & Strood	
Newport City Centre	2b	Newport	Jessica Morden	Newport East	South Wales
Bowthorpe & West Earlham	2	Norwich	Clive Lewis	Norwich South	
Heartsease & Pilling Park	2	Norwich	Alice Macdonald	Norwich North	
Devonport, Mount Wise & Morice Town	2	Plymouth	Luke Pollard	Plymouth Sutton & Devonport	Plymouth
St Budeaux	2	Plymouth	Fred Thomas	Plymouth Moor View	Plymouth
Paulsgrove East	2	Portsmouth	Amanda Martin	Portsmouth North	
Fratton West	2	Portsmouth	Stephen Morgan	Portsmouth South	
Ribbleton	2	Preston	Mark Hendrick	Preston	
Pendleton	2	Salford	Rebecca Long-Bailey	Salford	Salford
Peel Green	2	Salford	Michael Wheeler	Worsley & Eccles South	Salford
Weston	2	Southampton	Darren Paffey	Southampton Itchen	Southampton

Neighbourhood	Phase	Local authority	MP	Constituency	KCIN university
Redbridge & Millbrook West	2	Southampton	Satvir Kaur	Southampton Test	Southampton
Bentilee & Ubbertley	2	Stoke-on-Trent	Gareth Snell	Stoke-on-Trent Central	
Bradeley & Chell Heath	2b	Stoke-on-Trent	David Williams	Stoke-on-Trent North	
Meir North	2	Stoke-on-Trent	Allison Gardner	Stoke-on-Trent South	
Washington	1	Sunderland	Sharon Hodgson	Washington & Sunderland West	
Thorney Close & Plains Farm	2	Sunderland	Bridget Phillipson	Houghton & Sunderland South	
Bilston	1	Wolverhampton	Pat McFadden	Wolverhampton South East	
Low Hill	2	Wolverhampton	Sureena Brackenridge	Wolverhampton North East	
Waterloo Road	2b	Wolverhampton	Warinder Juss	Wolverhampton West	
Wrexham	1	Wrexham	Andrew Ranger	Wrexham	Wrexham

APPENDIX 2: STUDY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Part 1. Context

Question	Outcome
1. What does Pride in Place mean to you in your position?	Context: Understanding of pride in place
2. Has the neighbourhood previously received government funding?	Context: Pride in Place programme
3. Can you name one opportunity you see for the PiP neighbourhood investment?	Context: Understanding of the Pride in Place investment
4. Can you name one challenge you see for the PiP neighbourhood investment?	Context: Understanding of the Pride in Place investment

Part 2. Data / evaluation

Question	Outcome
5. Has there been a survey, consultation or research about your PiP neighbourhood? If so, who undertook it and when was it done?	Data: baseline
6. Does your PiP neighbourhood have a plan as to how it will gather data over the course of the 10-year investment?	Data: baseline
7. What key data / data metrics does your neighbourhood plan to work with over the course of the 10-year investment? What modes of evaluation are planned and what data will you gather? How will this work with the MHCLG evaluation requirements?	Data: baseline
8. What modes of resident engagement are planned and what data will you gather? Who will be involved?	Data: engagement
9. Does your PiP neighbourhood have expertise on data? Does your PiP neighbourhood have a plan for how data will be stored and shared over the course of the 10-year investment?	Data: governance
10. Does your PiP neighbourhood know who analyses and manages the data? Does your PiP neighbourhood have a plan for how data will be stored and shared over the course of the 10-year investment?	Data: impact

Part 3. Governance

Question	Outcome
11. What is the process for setting up your PiP neighbourhood board and who will be the members?	Governance: PIP Board

Question	Outcome
12. How are different stakeholders being involved in the governance of the neighbourhood and the spend? What is the process, how is it managed or coordinated?	Governance: changing roles
13. What is your role in the PiP neighbourhood? At what stage were you involved, do you have any role at a wider level, has your role changed?	Governance: stakeholder role
14. Are you engaged with any other PiP neighbourhoods?	Governance: coordination
15. How can Key Cities support your neighbourhood? What potential do you see for national coordination or exchange?	Governance: Key Cities and national
16. Does the neighbourhood boundary definition work with the local governance and resident population?	Governance: boundaries

Part 4. Additional questions

Question	Outcome
17. What is the existing role of community organisations and social infrastructure in your neighbourhood and what are the key places and the gaps?	Context: social infrastructure
18. To what extent is the project making use of co-design with the community?	Governance: engagement

APPENDIX 3: STUDY NEIGHBOURHOOD DEPRIVATION DATA

LSOA	LSOA name	MSOA	IMD Q	IMD R	CNI score	CNI rank	Assets rank
Bradeley & Chell Heath:							
E01014261	Stoke-on-Trent 003A	E02002953	Q1	1,016	56.97	23,665	14,530
E01014262	Stoke-on-Trent 003B	E02002953	Q1	3,372	65.38	19,233	13,701
E01014263	Stoke-on-Trent 003C	E02002953	Q1	3,232	67.87	18,009	13,596
E01014333	Stoke-on-Trent 003D	E02002953	Q4	17,141	101.69	6,117	17,844
E01014334	Stoke-on-Trent 003E	E02002953	Q3	8,614	105.32	5,327	19,147
Devonport, Mount Wise & Morice Town:							
E01015043	Plymouth 026A	E02003147	Q1	1,196	94.72	7,866	29,823
E01015044	Plymouth 026B	E02003147	Q1	2,657	72.60	15,875	30,956
E01015045	Plymouth 026C	E02003147	Q1	448	81.21	12,249	30,265
E01015046	Plymouth 026D	E02003147	Q1	2,529	56.19	24,089	30,047
E01015047	Plymouth 026E	E02003147	Q1	2,847	48.40	28,374	30,035
Luton in Chatham							
E01016061	Medway 020A	E02003333	Q1	3,365	61.48	21,300	31,500
E01016063	Medway 020B	E02003333	Q1	1,279	104.68	5,467	31,323
E01016064	Medway 020C	E02003333	Q1	4,508	76.36	14,245	33,653
E01016069	Medway 020D	E02003333	Q1	1,428	74.84	14,921	32,847
Morecambe West End:							
E01025110	Lancaster 009A	E02005229	Q1	210	115.62	3,523	30,019
E01025116	Lancaster 009B	E02005229	Q1	4,314	112.95	3,946	34,386
E01025117	Lancaster 009C	E02005229	Q1	33	118.64	3,109	31,216
E01025120	Lancaster 009D	E02005229	Q1	2,596	116.08	3,451	31,538
Pendleton							
E01005681	Salford 024C	E02001180	Q1	1,872	100.74	6,326	36,171
E01005682	Salford 024D	E02001180	Q1	93	111.27	4,219	38,199
E01033984	Salford 024E	E02001180	Q1	1,854	72.43	15,946	37,526
Twerton & Whiteway							
E01014461	B&NES 011A	E02002995	Q2	9,117	61.81	21,112	25,315
E01014462	B&NES 011B	E02002995	Q2	4,576	87.67	9,941	23,505
E01014463	B&NES 011C	E02002995	Q1	3,120	102.13	6,033	27,800
E01014464	B&NES 011D	E02002995	Q1	3,774	89.10	9,496	20,994

Source: Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2019, OCSI UK Interim Community Needs Index (CNI) 2025. IMD Q = IMD quartile; IMD R = IMD rank; Assets rank = Civic Assets domain rank.



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ABOUT KEY CITIES

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www.plymouth.ac.uk/research/centre-for-place



www.i-place.uk