

A NATION OF NEIGHBOURS

Rebuilding Britain from the Ground Up

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The national story of Britain today is of drift and division. There's a sense that we are no longer progressing as a country and that we are more divided as a nation than ever.

We don't believe this to be the whole story. We have a long and proud tradition of social innovation that, away from the centre, is still alive and well. There is hope percolating in communities where people still believe in helping their neighbours.

Because while the headlines scream crisis, division and decline, something else is happening out of the spotlight. Trust in politicians, institutions and the media is in free fall, yet community connection persists. In towns, cities and villages across the country, people are getting on with it. Stepping up where government has stepped back. Leading in the long-term vacuum. Across the UK we are solving problems, helping neighbours, and shaping the future — street by street.

The real power lies with us

We are a nation that has been powered forward by people, building with creativity, care and graft, all fuelled by a sense of shared endeavour. This country wasn't made in Whitehall. It was built by communities.

From the construction of maternity wards in the Welsh Valleys to the opening of community centres for young people in East London. From the world's first railway lines in the early nineteenth century to the launch of a thousand designers in the early twenty-first, the country has been characterised by design and innovation, led by communities.

They didn't wait for permission. They got together and built what they needed: maternity wards, youth centres, railways, design collectives. They made things happen. They still do. When the pandemic hit, it wasn't politicians who held the country together — it was neighbours. It was volunteers. It was civil society.

Leading by examples

Governments ignore this to their cost. Civil society, made up of individual citizens, voluntary organisations, social enterprises and charities - big and small - are our nation's biggest and most undervalued asset.

And yet, time and again, governments treat communities like a barrier — something to manage or ignore. Communities aren't the problem. They're the answer. You can't fix the country without the people who live in it.

The government's announcement of the £5bn Pride in Place funding appears to recognise this. Through funding for tangible improvements in neighbourhoods, shaped by the communities themselves, it is a potentially powerful symbol of a future model for partnership between government, civil society and communities could look like. Alongside other initiatives including the £100m Test, Learn and Grow programme,¹ the £2.2bn on Neighbourhood Health Improvement plans² and the new Civil Society Covenant³ there is already a policy agenda in play.

Now is the time to tell an even bigger story about this.

Across the country, there are organisations that are ready to help in a new agenda to rebuild Britain, street by street. There is a new story to tell about our nation of neighbours, a nation that works together for national renewal. Whether we care about public service reform, community cohesion, democratic renewal, neighbourhood regeneration, or local growth plans, it starts with people in their neighbourhoods, and can amount to the national renewal this country urgently needs.

This isn't just about better policies. It's about changing how the country works — and who it works for.

It's not a transactional "you voted, we delivered." It's "we're in this together". If we want to see real change — in housing, public services, local growth — we have to start with people in their places, not plans made in offices hundreds of miles away.

1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/communities-across-the-country-to-benefit-from-innovation-squads-to-re-build-public-services>

2 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-takes-action-to-deliver-neighbourhood-health-services>

3 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-society-covenant/civil-society-covenant>

The quiet revolution is already underway

There are groups making change happen, some of those are famous names, the Scouts to the Women's Institute and the Co-Operative Movement, others include Camerados, Warm Welcome, Citizens UK, Grapevine, Locality, Our Future, the Felix Project - and those that are working locally like This is Capacity in Liverpool or The Old Boat Corner Community Centre in Brighton. They don't wait around for permission. They build, they adapt, they create. They're running food banks, supporting young people, reviving local economies, and designing new ways of delivering care.

Leading thinkers and practitioners, think tanks and journals, have tried to shape a counter-narrative to the declinism and disbelief, rooted in the art of the possible. It's the story that some have called Ordinary Hope,⁴ others Community Power,⁵ Relational, or Liberated,⁶ public services, shaped with and for citizens. People like Hilary Cottam have captured attention in wide parts of the UK and across the world, with brilliant books like Radical Help and The Work We Need. Vital scholars like Dan Honig and Margaret Levi have done the same. Inspiring organisations, new and old, including Belong, Camerados, Citizens UK, Locality, Local Trust, New Local and Our Future, have also led the way, making the argument, bringing people together, pushing the case.

Previous governments set out with good intentions, like the Big Society, but that quickly descended into a cover for austerity and an excuse for government to abscond. Today's politicians have been inspired, have listened, and have acted. But these efforts are too often seen as "nice extras" rather than what they really are — the purpose of national renewal.

The edges must become the centre

Our theory of change is that there is powerful energy at the edges,⁷ as others have called it. But the edges need to become the whole. We need to flip the script. Enable the communities that are already leading to shape the national agenda — not the other way around.

But that takes more than funding. It takes more than a government strategy. It takes a new national story — one that celebrates what's already working, and makes space for it to grow. To succeed where others have failed, Pride in Place needs that story to be properly owned, shaped and felt by communities.

Demos and UCL Policy Lab, supported by Lloyds Bank Foundation, are working to build the coalition of the willing for national renewal, and to co-create a new story of national renewal rooted in neighbourhoods rather than the centre. Stories matter. Stories give a movement direction. They enable change-makers in towns, cities and villages across the UK to realise: they are part of something far bigger, they are the movement. Stories create the license for everyone to act.

This isn't a story the centre can write alone. But communities can tell it. That's where we need to start.

The real opportunity of our moment is in our communities and not in Whitehall-as-usual. We have already seen that. When there is political inertia at the centre, civil society can take

4 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/policy-lab/ordinary-hope-building-better-future-working-together>

5 <https://www.google.com/search?q=community+power>

6 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Taskforce-Vision-Paper_May.pdf

7 <https://medium.com/@jamestplunkett/the-energy-at-the-edges-8732ac49ecc9>

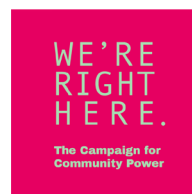
the lead. Governments don't always have the capacity or imagination to change things. Communities don't receive the necessary backing and support. To change this, we need a shared story to fuel us. You can't get people behind things without a mission. So, this is the work we, the coalition of the willing, need to do.

We are ready for this. We recognise the government and local authorities' first steps on this and urge them to make community action central to the plan for national renewal by creating meaningful central capacity - bringing together all the work across government in a maximal strategy for neighbourhoods - and by putting this story at the heart of its vision for a more hopeful future.

ABOUT THIS PAPER

Nation of Neighbours is a year-long programme led by cross-party think tank **Demos** and the **UCL Policy Lab**, supported by **Lloyds Bank Foundation**. Co-created with civil society, it will set out a fresh narrative for national renewal - showing how trusted community organisations, rooted in people's lives, hold the key to reconnecting citizens and driving renewal.

In the spirit of collaboration, we are delighted that the organisations below are forming this early coalition of the willing. If you share our commitment to shaping this work, to find out more and get involved, email: policylab@ucl.ac.uk.



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