

Neighbourhood Governance in Practice

Lessons from Test Valley
for Democratic Renewal

Executive Summary

Context

The forthcoming English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill presents a significant opportunity to reimagine how local democracy operates at neighbourhood level. For councils across England, establishing neighbourhood governance will not simply be a technical requirement but a chance to strengthen democratic legitimacy, rebuild civic trust and organise services around the places where people live.

Test Valley Borough Council has, for more than a decade, worked to develop a community-powered model that places residents' lived experience, ambitions and priorities at the centre of how decisions are made. The approach is rooted in the belief that local government works best when communities help define issues, shape solutions and share ownership of outcomes. It is characterised by mindset change, long-term relationships and genuine collaboration and underpinned by a place-based collaborative culture which puts communities before organisation.

This model is of national significance as it has enhanced the relationship between representative and participative democracy and, as a result, strengthened the overall democratic process and, in particular, the role of councillors. The Council's organisational development journey - for both staff and councillors - has constantly looked outwards for inspiration and learning. The model continues to iterate and evolve in partnership with communities, councillors, partners and council staff.

The Test Valley story is significant in helping us understand the opportunities that neighbourhood governance can offer for a different approach to public service in the years ahead.

This report

Based on research undertaken by Collaborate CIC with Test Valley Borough Council, this report explores Test Valley's story with a focus on what effective neighbourhood governance looks like in practice. The report identifies **ten enabling conditions** illustrated through three case studies from across the borough: Andover Vision, Romsey Future, and neighbourhood governance across Test Valley's rural communities.

Together, these examples demonstrate that neighbourhood governance is not a single model or organisational structure. Rather, it functions as an **ecosystem of relationships, partnerships, community assets and democratic forums** operating at different scales. Most important is the culture and wider enabling conditions that enable formal democratic structures - councillors, councils and committees - to sit alongside and work with relational practices, community leadership and cross-sector collaboration.

The experience of Test Valley highlights a critical lesson: **structural reform alone will not deliver meaningful neighbourhood governance**. The most important ingredients are cultural and relational - shared stewardship of place, collaborative leadership across political boundaries, and investment in the relationships and capabilities that enable communities and councils to work together. Where these enabling conditions are present, neighbourhood governance delivers both **tangible and relational outcomes**. This report identifies practical steps any council can take to develop the enabling conditions needed to partner with communities in shaping place:

A Roadmap for Change

1. Start with developing a culture of community partnership
2. Work with the ecosystem that already exists
3. Anchor governance in places people recognise
4. Equip councillors as community convenors
5. Invest in relationships, capacity and patience

Ten enabling conditions for effective neighbourhood governance

We have identified ten enabling conditions that operate at multiple levels. Together they create the environment in which neighbourhood governance can succeed.

Enabling Condition	What this means
Foundational Mental Models - underlying beliefs, visions and values	
1. Commitment to community partnership	Communities are recognised as partners in shaping place, not simply recipients of services.
2. A shared story of place	Governance is organised around places people recognise and care about, reflecting local identity and scale.
Relationships, Connections and Power Dynamics	
3. Collaborative place-based leadership	Councils convene partners and enable community leadership while providing legitimacy and support.
4. Cross-party approach	Councillors take a cross-party approach to understanding communities, prioritising community benefit and work constructively across party lines.
5. Equity and inclusion	Participation is designed to include diverse perspectives and reach beyond established voices.
6. Trusted relationships	Trust develops through consistency, patience, shared learning and a balance of continuity and renewal.
Policies, Practices and Resource Flows	
7. Culture development	Councils and partners work together to shape a collaborative culture that supports openness, respect and participation.
8. Networks of relationships	Practical networks and forums sustain relationships and collaboration across communities and organisations, which decision-makers, including elected councillors, are active participants in.
9. Participatory decision-making	Residents participate in deliberation and decision-making, not just consultation.
10. Investment in capacity and capabilities	Councils invest in people, skills and resources that enable communities to act on local priorities.

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Neighbourhood Governance: The opportunity for local government

This report shares insights and recommendations on effective neighbourhood governance, drawing on evidence from Test Valley Borough Council in Hampshire. Based on three case studies, it sets out what neighbourhood governance looks like in practice in Test Valley, the enabling conditions that support this, and a practical roadmap for change for other local authorities.

The forthcoming English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill will require all local authorities in England to establish effective neighbourhood governance arrangements in order to move decision-making closer to residents and provide opportunities to organise public services around local need.

This report builds on [research](#) undertaken by Collaborate CIC on behalf of Test Valley Borough Council to make the case for placing relational, place-based practice at the heart of local government reorganisation (LGR) - not as an optional add-on but as the foundation for democratic renewal and more responsive, place-based public services.

About this report

This report sets out:

- The need to think of neighbourhood governance in terms of [an ecosystem approach](#), of multiple instruments and relationships in different contexts
- [Ten enabling conditions](#) emerging from Test Valley's work that reveal what it takes for neighbourhood governance to operate effectively in practice;
- [Three in-depth case studies](#) from within and across Test Valley, which collectively illustrate each of these enabling conditions in action;
- Our [practical recommendations to councils](#) setting out on this journey to developing a shared stewardship culture of place-based, relational working at the heart of neighbourhood governance reform.

Why Test Valley?

Test Valley Borough Council describes itself as a community council. It is an organisation committed to working with, not doing to, its communities, and to adopting asset-based approaches to local public service.

Across the borough, local politicians, council officers and communities are aligned around this ambition, providing unusual coherence between vision and practice. This alignment has enabled the council to move beyond rhetoric and embed relational, place-based working into how it operates day to day.

It is an organisation committed to working with, not doing to, its communities, and to adopting asset-based approaches to local public service. This shift has been driven by a belief that better outcomes for places emerge when councils work alongside communities rather than acting solely as decision-makers on their behalf.

Test Valley is not a single, uniform place. If you asked the people of Test Valley where they are from, 'Test Valley' would not be the answer. Test Valley itself is not a place. It is a collection of distinct towns, villages and neighbourhoods, each with its own identity, assets and challenges. That diversity has required the council to resist one-size-fits-all solutions and develop adaptive approaches. This makes it a particularly useful context from which to draw insight, as the practices described in this report have evolved across and in response to varied local settings rather than within a single homogeneous community.

While Test Valley is not characterised by the levels of deprivation seen in some other parts of England, there are areas of deprivation, particularly in the towns. And the learning can be applied to places that have higher levels of deprivation. The core challenges addressed here - rebuilding trust, strengthening participation, working across political differences and shifting from consultation to co-production - are national in scope. The enabling conditions identified in this report are cultural and relational foundations for effective neighbourhood governance in any context.

Why Collaborate CIC?

[*Collaborate CIC*](#) is a social consultancy that helps people, organisations and partnerships work better together to develop more effective and equitable approaches to tackling complex social challenges. We bring deep expertise in systems thinking, leadership development, and cross-sector collaboration from over a decade of work with local authorities, wider local partners and communities.

What did we do?

Collaborate CIC undertook research to understand how neighbourhood governance operates in practice and what enables it to succeed. This research comprised:

- A **scoping meeting with key officer stakeholders** to explore definitions of neighbourhood governance, the spectrum of different approaches in Test Valley and identify specific case studies to explore in greater depth.
- **Desk research and document review**, analysing key strategies, reports, governance documents and previous evaluations to understand the policy context and evolution of Test Valley's approach.
- **Online focus groups and interviews** with council leaders, ward councillors, officers, community groups and other local stakeholders to explore lived experience, challenges and impact.
- On-site **focus groups and visits** to Romsey, Broughton, Augusta Park and Andover Health Hub and an in-person meeting with representatives of the Community Resilience Forum, to meet people directly involved in the work, see their places in context and gather their insights.
- **Review of key insights gathered and discussion of enabling conditions** with the Member and Community Development Group

This report also draws on Collaborate CIC's wider work with local authorities and communities across the country, incorporating comparative insights and examples of good practice in place-based, relational neighbourhood governance.

Public Service Reform and the role of Neighbourhood Governance

The Public Service Reform context

Effective neighbourhood governance both contributes to and is enabled by wider public service reform. Some local authorities have been working for many years to transform their role, shifting away from a focus on control, compliance, and siloed, standardised services. They are moving towards approaches that operate at local scales that are meaningful to residents, and emphasise relationships, community power, and prevention to enable better outcomes at lower cost.

This direction is reflected in the current national context for public service reform. Improving local decision making, empowering communities, and developing more people-centred preventative services are core ambitions of devolution; Local Government Reorganisation; Test, Learn and Grow, and place-based budgeting. The aim is not only to encourage local areas to adopt these approaches, but to reform the state at a national level to enable maximum and sustained impact.¹

Collaborate's 2025 report for Test Valley Borough Council - [*The bigger you go, the less you know: seizing the local government reorganisation opportunity*](#) - sets out the case for place-based relational working, and examples of this in practice at a local authority level.

There are multiple complementary ways councils can enable this including:

Acting as convenor and steward of place: Enabling collective action to tackle complex challenges and create the conditions for people and places to flourish.

For example, councils in places such as Camden, Sheffield and Wigan have fostered a shared sense of purpose around collective goals, supported by coordinated delivery and joint investment in culture and leadership.²

Wigan is renowned for the Wigan Deal - a radical response to austerity developed in 2012 to rethink the relationship between the council and local residents. It helped Wigan Council transform its culture and ways of working to improve support for local people.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/minister-kaur-speech-at-total-place-now-conference>

² <https://collaboratecic.com/insights-and-resources/people-purpose-and-power/>

In 2023-24, the council refreshed its strategy to adapt to changing circumstances. Based on insights from broad engagement across the borough, in 2024, Wigan council and partners launched **Progress with Unity**, a new ten-year strategy and movement for change focused on addressing inequalities and supporting thriving neighbourhoods.

Progress with Unity reflected a shift - from the Deal which was a council owned and led initiative - to a shared movement for change across the borough. Progress with Unity centres partnership working, recognising that no one organisation alone can address the challenges and opportunities facing the borough, and that developing a more trusting and enabling relationship with communities and the VCSE is essential to improving outcomes.³

Preventative, people-centred service delivery: Developing services that are co-produced and responsive to local context.

This often involves developing locally-based integrated teams to make services more relational, accessible and preventative. Many are delivered in partnership with health, wider public services and VCSE partners.⁴ The focus on integrated multi-disciplinary working at a local level is reinforced by the government's new [neighbourhood health framework](#) that sets out the ambition for a neighbourhood health service delivered collectively by the NHS, local authorities and wider partners.

These models are often supported by approaches including social prescribing and trusted local people working to build relationships, understand their community, and enable holistic preventative support - for example Local Area Coordinators, community champions and Community Health and Wellbeing Workers.⁵

Development of micro-enterprises is another key way that some local authorities are enabling local, preventative and relational support that also boosts local employment and the economy.⁶

³ Collaborate CIC (February 2025) *A new era for Wigan Borough: from The Deal to Progress with Unity*, Collaborate CIC (February 2026) *Neighbourhood working in Wigan: from locality models to a relational, hyperlocal approach*

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<https://collaboratecic.com/insights-and-resources/the-bigger-you-go-the-less-you-know-seizing-the-local-government-reorganisation-opportunity/>

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<https://collaboratecic.com/insights-and-resources/the-bigger-you-go-the-less-you-know-seizing-the-local-government-reorganisation-opportunity/>, page 17-18.

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<https://collaboratecic.com/insights-and-resources/the-bigger-you-go-the-less-you-know-seizing-the-local-government-reorganisation-opportunity/>, page 16.

Thurrock Integrated Care Alliance (TICA) has developed a borough-wide, integrated care model that brings together health, housing, adult social care, and third-sector partners to co-design and deliver relational, community-focused services rooted in Human Learning Systems principles.

As the strategic partnership driving Thurrock's *Better Care Together* approach, TICA has shifted decision-making and frontline practice toward neighbourhood-based Integrated Locality Teams. These bring together professionals from the NHS, local authority, and voluntary sector to work with residents in their own contexts and co-produce tailored support rather than relying on siloed, task-based services.

This model emphasises early intervention, prevention, and collaborative problem-solving, reducing unnecessary referrals and improving outcomes by building sustained relationships, pooling local knowledge, and responding flexibly to individual and community needs.⁷

Fostering thriving communities and resident-led change: Working in a relational, place-based way requires councils to rebalance power, creating conditions for local organisations and residents to have greater influence over the places they live. This involves supporting both the physical and social infrastructure that underpins connected communities and civic participation. Mechanisms such as community asset transfer, and investment in citizen-led approaches like Asset-Based Community Development, can help achieve this.

Councils also enable communities to shape decisions as part of fostering thriving local democracy - which is where neighbourhood governance plays a role. Approaches include participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies, community networks, and the role of community councillors.

Asset Based Community Development is a strengths-based approach to working with communities adopted in many places across the UK and globally. It involves working with local people to map assets, forge local connections, help people identify how they can contribute, and encourage community action.

ABCD is central to Leeds City Council's approach to working with communities. Starting as a pilot, it now operates across 17 neighbourhoods, working alongside the NHS and wider local partners. "Talking Points," embeds social workers directly into neighbourhoods, "Small Sparks" grants help residents connect and take collective action on locally defined priorities, and ABCD underpins the

⁷ <https://www.humanlearning.systems/uploads/ThurrockIntegratedCareAlliance.pdf>

Neighbourhood Networks programme for older people. ABCD is now a key feature of Leeds' vision for adult social care, integrating housing, libraries, culture, parks and transport with care and support services.

Evaluations show the ABCD approach in Leeds strengthens social connections, community cohesion, and inclusivity.⁸

Cumberland Council, established in 2023 as a unitary authority, introduced eight Community Panels with delegated powers and funding to maintain strong local decision-making following reorganisation. These panels reflect distinct community identities and priorities, enabling more responsive governance tailored to local needs. Alongside formal meetings, they engage residents through community-based activities in accessible local settings, encouraging participation and dialogue.

The model supports participatory decision-making by involving residents and organisations in shaping local priorities and spending, ensuring decisions are informed by local insight rather than centralised control. It also empowers councillors to take ownership of locally agreed priorities while strengthening collaboration between communities, council services, and partner organisations.⁹

Somerset Council, established in 2023 as a unitary authority, established Local Community Networks (LCNs) as a central part of its place-based strategy. 18 networks act as the 'voice' of communities and hubs for engagement, partnerships, and local decision-making. They support community engagement, democratic participation, collaboration, local influence, and resource mobilisation, ensuring residents and partners can shape council activity and local priorities.

Their creation reflects a broader move to ensure Somerset is fully 'parished', devolving assets and services to local councils to address the challenge of balancing scale and local connection. Somerset Council believes this approach

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<https://collaboratecic.com/insights-and-resources/the-bigger-you-go-the-less-you-know-seizing-the-local-government-reorganisation-opportunity/>, page 12.

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/7640/1/AssetBasedCommunityDevelopmentEvaluationOfLeedsABCDPV-SOUTH.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/community-panels-cumberland-council>

will strengthen local engagement and improve links with wider public services such as the NHS, schools, and the voluntary sector.¹⁰

As part of its focus on collaborative missions that unite local people and partners around big issues, Camden Council's *We Make Camden* strategy and *The Way We Work* commit to engaging, catalysing, convening, and facilitating innovation and community activity.

Camden Council embeds partnership, co-design, and community-led approaches into its services to strengthen resident-council connections. To support this, it set up The Camden Centre for Relational Practice in November 2024 - a research and practice centre dedicated to creating relational cultures in public services. The focus is about increasing institutional capacity to do things with people, not to them.¹¹

Camden has an emphasis on opening up power structures and amplifying civic voices.¹² At a local level, council teams are developing neighbourhood ways of working that bring them closer to their communities. Starting with citizens assemblies, council teams have been working in Kilburn and Kentish Town to listen, understand different needs and create a culture in which people feel valued and able to participate. The work is relational rather than based on formal governance.¹³

These examples highlight the importance of considering neighbourhood governance in the context of wider public service reform, and the many different ways to approach it. Neighbourhood governance is most effective when it is positioned and developed as part of a wider commitment from councils to transform the way they lead, organise and relate to their communities.

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<https://collaboratecic.com/insights-and-resources/the-bigger-you-go-the-less-you-know-seizing-the-local-government-reorganisation-opportunity/>, page 38.

¹¹ <https://www.camden.gov.uk/camden-centre-for-relational-practice;>
<https://www.camden.gov.uk/documents/d/guest/4654-1-practice-framework-v6>

¹² <https://www.wemakecamden.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Camden-Council-inclusion-journey.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/articles/moving-towards-a-neighbourhood-strategy/>

Understanding neighbourhood governance

What is neighbourhood governance?

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill will require local authorities to “secure the effective governance” of neighbourhood areas. Regulations will define the obligations on local authorities and the relationship between neighbourhood governance structures and town and parish councils.

Our interpretation of neighbourhood governance in this research has been deliberately broad.

Neighbourhood

In this research, “neighbourhood” or “community” is self-defined. It could be hyper-local - a school catchment or estate - or operate at town, parish or community council scale. What matters is that it is meaningful to the people who use the term and that there is a shared understanding between the community and the council of the identity, context and story of that place.

Governance

“Governance” can be an off-putting word. It often evokes committees, constitutions and formal meetings. These are part of the picture - but only part.

Our research shows that effective neighbourhood governance is not simply a structure or forum. It is an ecosystem of relationships, cultures, behaviours and resource flows that enable people to shape what happens where they live. Focusing solely on explicit structures without attending to implicit norms, power dynamics and relational practice will limit impact.

The importance of a broad, multi-layered approach is reflected in the breadth of *Fostering thriving communities and resident-led change* examples listed above, and in the case studies from Test Valley that follow.

Why does this matter?

In a wider context of public sector reform, devolution and Local Government Reorganisation, reforms set out in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill represent a rare opportunity to reset the relationship between communities and the state - embedding place-based, relational approaches at the heart of local government.

The prize of neighbourhood governance done well is thriving and vibrant communities. For people, this means being connected to their neighbours, having places to mix and mingle, services that meet their needs and a sense of belonging. It means having their voices respected, and being treated as active shapers of their communities, not passive recipients of services.

For councils, it means reduced isolation, prevention and delay of the need for service intervention. It means an active civil society and engaged volunteers, supporting their place to be the best it can be. And it means a practical way to resist divisive forces and counter rising cynicism and distrust.

Yet what neighbourhood governance means in practice is not always clear. The [LGA neighbourhood governance hub](#) identifies neighbourhood governance as “the way in which people and organisations work together through formal structures, below the local authority level, for the benefit of the local community”.

Our research has shown that this is only part of the picture. Formal structures, usually set up and administered by local authorities (e.g. Area or Ward Committees) can be important instruments of neighbourhood governance. But they can also be staid, stuffy, and out-of-touch, appealing only to a small slice of the population and rarely allowing for genuine co-production and participation.

If formal structures are the sole focus, there is a risk of creating forums where communities merely observe decision-making rather than shape it. Unlocking local aspirations and contributions requires a more holistic approach that actively engages communities as partners in shaping their places.

Exactly what that approach looks like will be determined by the context of the neighbourhood itself. There is no one-size-fits-all approach - a centrally-mandated model that fails to recognise and trust local expertise and context will miss the mark. However, as the [We're Right Here](#) campaign cautions, flexibility must not become a smokescreen for models that do not meaningfully empower local people. Local variation must sit alongside clear expectations about participation, accountability and impact.

Place-based working in Test Valley

As outlined in the previous section, it is important to view Test Valley Borough Council's approach to neighbourhood governance as part of its wider strategy and ethos as a council.

Over the past decade, Test Valley Borough Council (TVBC) has consciously evolved its role from a traditional authority focused mainly on service delivery towards what it describes as a "**community council**". This shift has been driven by a belief that better outcomes for places emerge when councils work alongside communities rather than acting solely as decision-makers on their behalf, as well as a recognition that Test Valley is not a single uniform place, or one that communities identify with at a borough level. Rather than defining communities based on geography or a specific population scale, communities are understood in terms of the local sense of place and what people identify with.

Across the borough, local politicians, council officers and communities are aligned around this ambition, providing unusual coherence between vision and practice. This alignment has enabled the council to move beyond rhetoric and embed relational, place-based working into how it operates day to day.

Central to this approach has been:

- **Community first focus:** the recognition that communities are different and therefore having differing needs. The approach focuses on building on existing assets and networks.
- **Culture and approach to formal democratic roles and structures:** redefining the role of **councillors as community leaders and convenors**, supported by officers to build relationships, understand local priorities and connect partners and resources around them;
- Attention to **mindset and culture as foundational** to creating the conditions for communities to shape the future of their places. Working at place flows through the whole organisation. There is an ongoing commitment from staff and councillors to learning, adapting and evolving the approach;
- **Beginning with conversations about what local people want for their towns and villages.** Embedding community engagement across the organisation including in processes such as community-led masterplanning and deliberative engagement.
- Developing an **ecosystem of forums, partnerships and conversations** that together, enable participation and action;
- Putting thriving communities at the heart of its **corporate plan**, in response to feedback that emerged from deliberative engagement.

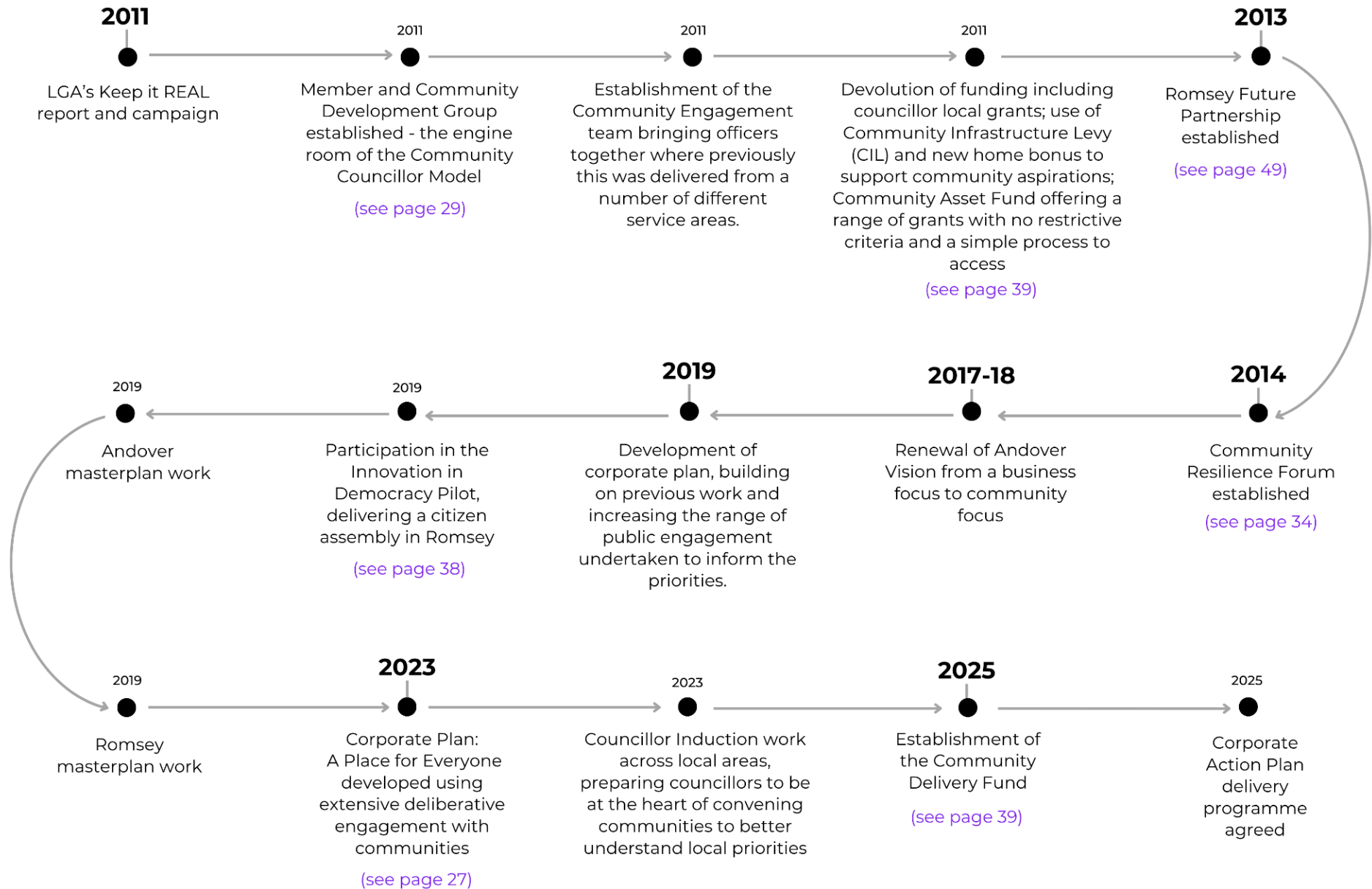
This has translated into real impact in communities (as identified in the case studies later in this report) as well as well-deserved praise for the council's overall approach. The Local Government Association [Corporate Peer Challenge](#) (October 2025) commended the council on "the strong strategic golden thread" recognised as "part of the council's DNA," and rated the authority in the highest possible category across systems leadership, place-based working with communities, organisational development and workforce, and communications. In addition, the Andover Health Hub (featured as a case study in this report) has been shortlisted in the Public/Public Partnerships category of the [LGC Awards 2026](#).

Test Valley's experience offers key insights relevant to councils across the UK as they consider how neighbourhood governance could operate in practice.

Their approach seems simple, but is quietly radical. For some councils, embedding neighbourhood governance in this way will require significant cultural and organisational change.

But if the ambitions of the Bill - stronger democratic legitimacy, more responsive services and renewed civic trust - are to be realised, then the lessons from Test Valley are clear: neighbourhood governance must be understood as part of a commitment to meaningful, place-based and relational working across a council, not simply as structural compliance.

Key milestones in the development of Test Valley Borough Council's approach to place-based working



The Community Councillor model and the role of councillors in place-based working

TVBC has given particular attention to the role of councillors in place-based working and community development. Test Valley's community councillor model has been a golden thread in its approach since early work in the 2010s through the LGA's Keep it Real programme.

The community councillor approach builds on the representative role of elected councillors and the democratic legitimacy they have, which distinguishes councils from other place-based actors.

Councils and councillors have a clear electoral mandate, institutional authority and decision-making power, and strong accountability mechanisms, including public scrutiny of decisions and standards procedures. However, in practice, they may be less trusted, less connected, and seen as less representative of the whole community than community-based groups, which often have stronger relational legitimacy, or service providers, who bring legitimacy through their professional expertise.

Effective place-based approaches need to bring together these different forms of legitimacy (democratic, relational and expert) to complement and serve the lived experience of residents, recognising that communities are best placed to identify their own needs and priorities. TVBC's community councillor model seeks to do just this, empowering and supporting elected councillors as conveners and community catalysts, rather than simply representatives.

While some view participative democracy as at odds with a council's role in representative democracy (through democratically elected members), TVBC have taken a more nuanced approach. In 2019 when TVBC was one of three authorities to pilot a citizens' assembly through the national Innovation in Democracy Programme, these participative approaches were an asset to, not a replacement for, the councillor role.

Since then, experience and use of deliberative approaches has grown within the council and been deployed in a range of contexts - from town masterplanning in Romsey, to developing the Corporate Plan, to identifying health priorities in Andover. These methods, as well as other community engagement practices, support councillors to get beyond the loudest and most engaged voices, to explore evidence alongside their wider communities. This enables councillors to take more informed and legitimate positions when making formal decisions and exercising their institutional powers

An ecosystem approach to neighbourhood governance

There are many different instruments of neighbourhood governance currently in use in Test Valley, operating at different scales. Some are permanent institutions while others are specific processes or interventions which may be more limited in scope or time. Across Test Valley, these instruments are used in different ways to support neighbourhood governance in towns, villages and new communities.

Test Valley's experience demonstrates the value of an **ecosystem approach** to neighbourhood governance. Rather than relying on a single model, the council works with a range of instruments depending on the place and the issue - from formal partnerships and councillor forums, to participatory processes and community-led initiatives. They sit on a spectrum from being formal, structured bodies such as town councils, committees, neighbourhood associations, to emergent and relational forums and exercises such as community engagement, place or issue-based partnerships or forums. Each has a role to play, but they are most effective when used in the right ways at the right times, recognising that places are dynamic and there is no one-size-fits-all model.

The Community Councillor model is at the heart of this ecosystem, harnessing the unique democratic legitimacy of the councillor role alongside community convening, engagement and participation. Community Councillors are an important bridge between the community and institutions, enabling legitimacy and engagement to be exchanged in both directions.

Test Valley's approach reveals an important insight: **structural reform alone will not deliver meaningful neighbourhood governance**. Without attention to culture, leadership, participation and trust, new arrangements risk becoming procedural rather than transformative.

Test Valley's approach is grounded in a belief in communities and a commitment to working alongside them as partners. It reflects an asset-based perspective: recognising what residents, community organisations and the council each bring, and enabling shared responsibility for local priorities and solutions.

Across different places and initiatives in Test Valley, we can see a common pattern of **ten enabling conditions** that make this way of working possible, supporting the Community Councillor model and the ecosystem of different approaches to neighbourhood governance to deliver tangible and relational impact for communities.

TVBC's Community Councillor Model: connecting communities, institutions and partners



These are not prescriptive steps or a single model to replicate. Rather, they describe the cultural, relational and practical foundations that allow neighbourhood governance to take root in different contexts.

The following section outlines these ten enabling conditions. The case studies that follow illustrate how they are expressed in practice across Test Valley, and why they can have wider relevance for councils and communities across the UK.

Ten Enabling Conditions for Effective Neighbourhood Governance

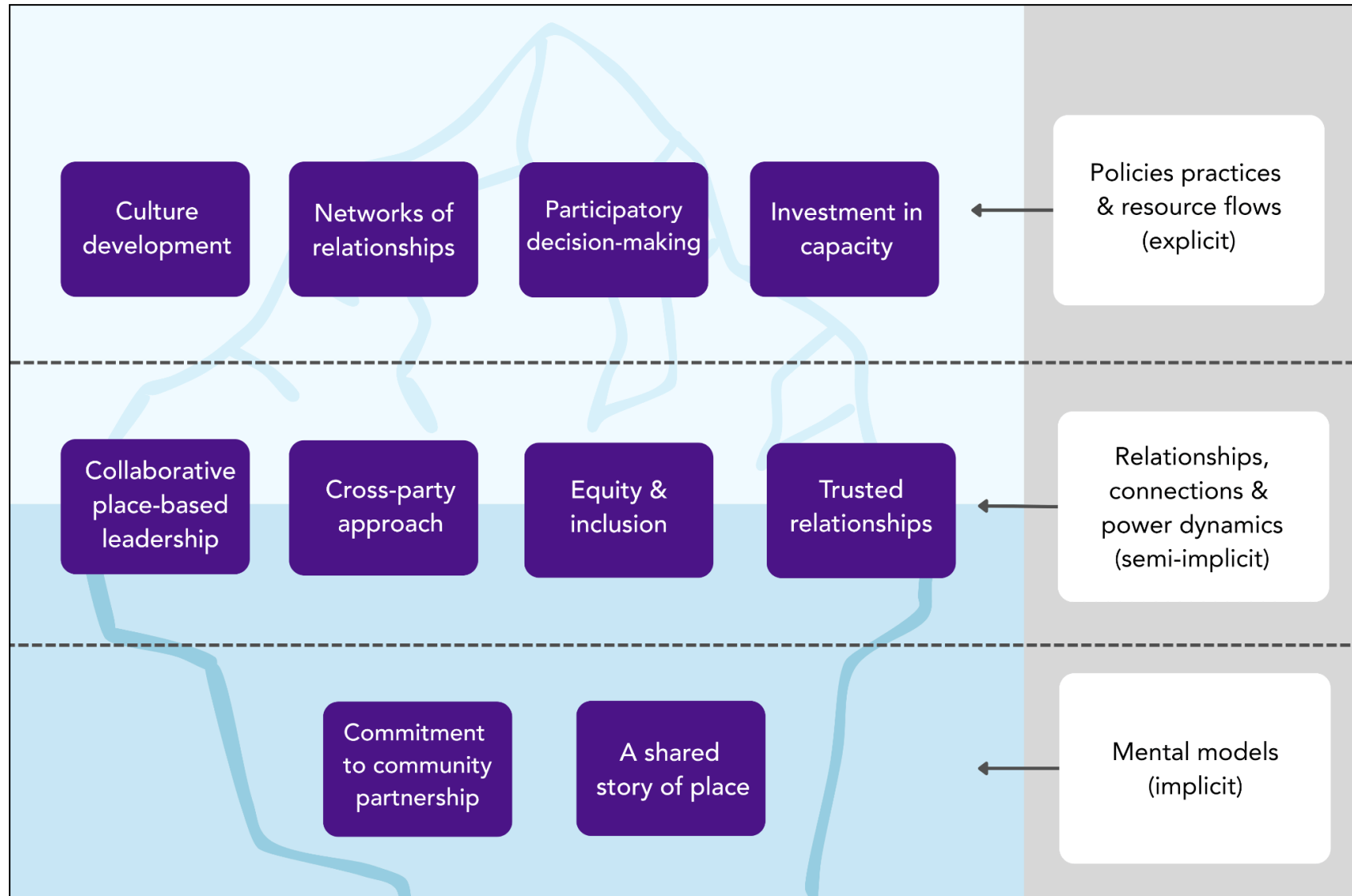
From our research, we have identified **ten enabling conditions** that support effective neighbourhood governance. These conditions emerge from TVBC's experience of operating as a "community council" with a commitment to place-based working, combined with our wider insight into the foundations of meaningful collaboration between councils, communities and partners.

Some of these conditions are **foundational and largely implicit**. They relate to shared mindsets, vision and values - the underlying beliefs about the role of communities and the responsibilities of councils. Others concern the **quality of relationships and power dynamics**, shaping how institutions, elected members and communities work together with openness, respect and shared purpose. A further set of conditions **are more tangible, relating to the alignment of policies, practices, resources and capabilities** that enable this way of working in the day to day.

To illustrate these elements, we draw on Schein's Iceberg Model and the Water of Systems Change Framework¹⁴, which distinguish between visible structural changes and the deeper cultural and relational shifts that sustain them, but which may be more hidden. Meaningful and sustainable change comes from building conditions at all levels.

¹⁴ https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change/

Ten enabling conditions for effective neighbourhood governance



Ten enabling conditions operate at multiple levels, from mindset and relationships to practical systems and resources. Together they create the environment in which neighbourhood governance can succeed.

Enabling Condition	What this means
Foundational Mental Models - underlying beliefs, visions and values	
1. Commitment to community partnership	Communities are recognised as partners in shaping place, not simply recipients of services.
2. A shared story of place	Governance is organised around places people recognise and care about, reflecting local identity and scale.
Relationships, Connections and Power Dynamics	
3. Collaborative place-based leadership	Councils convene partners and enable community leadership while providing legitimacy and support.
4. Cross-party approach	Councillors take a cross-party approach to understanding communities, prioritising community benefit and work constructively across party lines.
5. Equity and inclusion	Participation is designed to include diverse perspectives and reach beyond established voices.
6. Trusted relationships	Trust develops through consistency, patience, shared learning and a balance of continuity and renewal.
Policies, Practices and Resource Flows	
7. Culture development	Councils and partners work together to shape a collaborative culture that supports openness, respect and participation.
8. Networks of relationships	Practical networks and forums sustain relationships and collaboration across communities and organisations, which decision-makers, including elected councillors, are active participants in.
9. Participatory decision-making	Residents participate in deliberation and decision-making, not just consultation.
10. Investment in capacity and capabilities	Councils invest in people, skills and resources that enable communities to act on local priorities.

Test Valley Borough Council: The ten enabling conditions in practice

Test Valley Borough Council's experience demonstrates how neighbourhood governance can emerge when cultural commitment, political leadership and practical investment come together over time.

Rather than beginning with new formal structures, Test Valley has developed an ecosystem of neighbourhood governance across the borough. Different places - towns, villages and new developments - use different approaches, but are connected by shared values, relationships and enabling infrastructure.

When place-based leadership, shared stewardship and relational practice are backed by practical investment and cross-party commitment, neighbourhood governance can strengthen democratic legitimacy, enhance service responsiveness and rebuild civic trust.

This section shows how enabling conditions for effective neighbourhood governance are expressed in practice through the way TVBC works and its borough-wide infrastructure. Then, the report goes on to summarise and lay out three case studies of neighbourhood governance at a place-based level.

1. Commitment to community partnership

Effective neighbourhood governance rests on a fundamental belief that communities have both the right and the capability to shape the places they live.

This requires councils to move beyond transactional service delivery and towards a model of shared stewardship. It requires recognising that thriving places are co-produced through relationships between residents, elected councillors, institutions and organisations. It involves letting go of the illusion of control, adopting an asset-based perspective, and engaging communities as partners rather than consultees. It means exploring the complexity of collaborative relational ways of working, not looking for simple fixes.

This shift in mindset is the foundation of effective neighbourhood governance. Without it, structural reform alone will not deliver meaningful change.

In practice, this means that Councillors, officers, partners and residents are each encouraged to see themselves as stewards of place, each bringing different perspectives and assets.

Asset Based Community Development in TVBC

At TVBC, a commitment to community partnership is underpinned and inspired by Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). ABCD is a neighbourhood-based model that focuses on identifying and harnessing local strengths, relationships, and networks to support citizen-led change. In this context, 'assets' refers not only to physical buildings and spaces, but to people, relationships, skills and culture. They are self-defined by communities, working from a ground-up view of place in which formal services work with communities to understand and identify what matters and bring attention to what is 'strong' rather than what is 'wrong'.

For TVBC, this approach is summed up as **going towards where people are already coming together and what they are concerned about**. By starting there, public servants can listen to understand and support what really matters to people and identify how they can add value in those spaces - not by doing things to people, but by being alongside them in conversation and figuring out next steps together.

2. A shared story of place

Neighbourhood governance must be rooted in places that are meaningful to the people who live there, and the recognition that each place has different needs, strengths and aspirations. Places provide the shared stories around which different perspectives can align.

Geography matters - whether a town, a village, a local estate or a parish. Rather than attempts to impose uniform models across diverse geographies, governance structures and engagement approaches should flex to reflect local identity, history and scale. Legitimacy flows from working at a level people recognise and feel connected to, rather than imposing uniform or administrative arrangements that lack emotional or social resonance.

Test Valley's Corporate Plan 2023-2027

Instead of organising priorities solely around services or policy themes, **the Plan describes how the council will work with distinct communities**: Villages & rural areas; the larger towns and urban centres of Andover and Romsey; and residential communities in the south east of the borough. Anchoring the plan in places that residents recognise and care about - whether that's a town, village,

estate or parish - enables the Plan to articulate the key characteristics of each and what the council will do over the next four years and beyond. This approach emerged from the deliberate engagement that the Council did with communities to develop the plan, where it became clear that the way the people spoke and thought about their priorities was through the lens of place. So the council adopted this too. As the plan says:

"A Place for Everyone – Supporting our communities to thrive", is more than just a title for this corporate plan. It reflects our passion and commitment to work with our communities in a way that celebrates their uniqueness, sense of belonging and the ambitions people have for the places where they live. We have invested significantly over the last decade to work in an ever more place-based way, reflecting that one size does not fit all, and that we must continue to develop a deep understanding of what matters most to local communities in order to be able to fully support them.

This plan renews our long-standing commitment to empower local communities through the way we work. The plan sets out how the council will deliver our priorities through a community focus so that they can be tailored to make sure they are relevant and appropriate to local circumstances. The framework used to describe this in the corporate plan is through the lens of a number of communities across the borough"

3. Collaborative place-based leadership

Collaborative leadership, capable of responding to local context and evolving circumstances, is essential to sustain trust and momentum. Leadership must be enabling rather than directive, but it must also be clear about its role and accountability.

Councils play a critical convening role - providing legitimacy, resources and institutional access while enabling community leadership to flourish. Elected members and officers must be explicit about their respective roles and responsibilities.

In practice, this might mean accepting that local priorities emerge through dialogue and that progress can sometimes be messy or contested. The council's role is not to control these processes, but to support and enable them.

Test Valley Borough Council's Member and Community Development Group (MCDG)

The Test Valley Community Councillor model recognises that councillors play a key leadership role in their communities. But this is not a traditional 'command and control' style of leadership, nor simply about formal decisions made in the committee chamber.

TVBC's [Councillor Role Definition](#) (developed through the MCDG with the participation of all councillors and agreed by the full Council) clearly sets out the collaborative, place-based leadership expected of elected representatives. While it includes more traditional requirements around decision-making, constitutional responsibilities and the Code of Conduct, it begins with an emphasis on community facilitation and leadership, specifically drawing out councillors' responsibilities to:

- *Provide community leadership, acting as community catalysts for change by connecting with individuals and groups to encourage communities to reach their full potential.*
- *Help improve community capacity and resilience to help them 'to do more for themselves'.*
- *Seek to understand all views within a community and ensure that these contribute towards any local prioritisation or community planning*
- *Signpost communities to appropriate internal and external resources to help them action their plans.*
- *Be aware of, share and promote good practice and opportunities relating to community engagement*

Councillors are supported to step into this leadership role by an induction process that really focuses on the community, including place-based events which immerse councillors in their community role right from the start. With the day to day support of Community Engagement officers who regularly meet with Ward Councillors and support them to engage effectively with their communities, as well as opportunities to connect to and understand the breadth of council services and delivery through events like the annual Councillor Market place, councillors are well equipped to fulfil the parallel asks of understanding what's happening in their community and what's going on in the authority, and then convene and bring them together.

4. Community before party politics

Mature neighbourhood governance places community benefit above party political positioning. This depends on relationships between councillors, officers and partners being conducted on an adult-to-adult basis, with mutual respect and a shared commitment to constructive problem-solving. This does not remove democratic debate, it reframes it around shared stewardship of place.

Cross-party working, respect for the mandate of all elected members, and a commitment to collaborative problem-solving are essential. All councillors, regardless of political affiliation or role, must be enabled to represent and convene their communities effectively, with access to information about their communities, supportive officer relationships and small-scale funding.

In practice this also means recognising that it is in the interests of political leaders and administrations to maintain respectful relationships with opposition councillors and partners. Leading parties play an important role in enabling opposition members to perform their ward councillor role well.

A network of cross-party support for the community councillor model

A network of formal and informal groups and forums facilitate meaningful cross-party place-based working in Test Valley. These spaces bring together administration and opposition councillors, Cabinet members and back-benchers, and Members and staff to share insight, devise ways to support communities and track progress and impact.

The **Member and Community Development Group (MCDG)** is the engine room of Test Valley Borough Council's place-based approach to neighbourhood governance. The MCDG is a cross-party steering group of councillors who provide a strategic overview of the support, guidance and ongoing development of the TVBC community councillor model and the council's philosophy and approach to place-based working. This group has been pivotal in embedding this model in practice. It is chaired by the Leader of the Council and further comprises the Leader of the Opposition, relevant Portfolio Holders and other back bench members from both parties.

The MCDG has a work programme focussed on three interconnected themes:

- Using the community councillor model to enhance local democracy and deliver actions for communities.
- Information, communication and measuring impact at a community level.
- Councillor development.

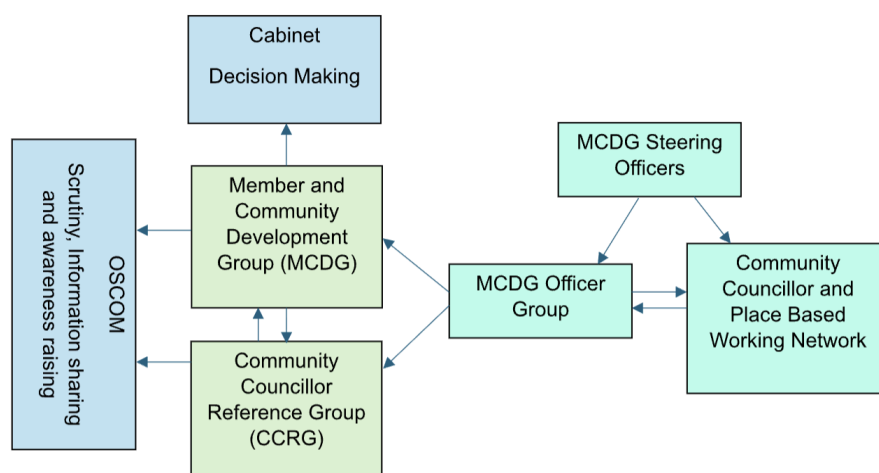
Over the past decade, it has driven significant innovations, including:

- the creation of a dedicated communities team to support councillors;
- the introduction of ward-based budgets and a Community Asset Fund;
- the allocation of Community Infrastructure Levy funding directly for community use;
- championing participative democracy, piloting Citizens' Assemblies and embedding deliberative approaches into corporate planning and town centre regeneration.

Alongside the councillors sits the **MCDG Officer Group**. This is a cross-service group of officers who work directly with the MCDG to develop support and guidance based on the agreed work programme. Representatives from Community and Leisure, Legal and Democratic, Planning Policy and Economic Development and Strategy and Innovation attend this group, which is chaired by the Chief Executive. This provides wrap-around strategic support and liaison to Members.

Established in 2024, the **Community Councillor Reference Group** is a cross-party group of councillors appointed from the membership of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This brings a broader group of councillors into developing the community councillor model and approach to place-based working alongside MCDG. Together, they test and pilot new areas of work that support councillors in their role working with local communities. The CCRG takes a practical lens, providing feedback and drawing upon their experiences of how place-based working happens in practice, highlighting areas where the council could further refine and develop its member support and development offer.

In addition, cross-party collaboration is enabled through all councillor briefings on a range of topics, cross-party Ward briefings on local issues and a cross-party LGR working group.



5. Equity and inclusion

Inclusion is not incidental. Effective neighbourhood governance actively seeks out and amplifies a diversity of voices.

This means reaching beyond the most confident or established participants and designing processes that create multiple ways for people to engage - formal and informal, digital and face-to-face, one-off or more sustained. It requires attention to barriers to participation and a conscious effort to counterbalance dominant perspectives. It means working to establish trusted relationships as well as drawing on those that already exist and expertise that others have about how to meaningfully include specific groups.

Creative community engagement approaches

Community engagement officers champion and use a range of engagement methods shaped around where people are, how they feel comfortable taking part and prioritising inclusive, creative and fun ways to engage. Their approaches consciously avoid traditional, transactional consultation methods and instead create time and space for conversation.

One of the more visible approaches taken has been the use of creative pop-up engagement spaces in vacant units of the local shopping centre. These spaces are deliberately informal, colourful and welcoming, inviting people who may not otherwise engage in consultation to take part. Activities such as building Lego towers, using washing lines for ideas, and voting with counters or stickers provide accessible, non-verbal ways for people to share views.

A recent example involved engagement on designs for a new pavilion and splash pad in Andover. An artist led a free creative activity for children to design their own splash pads on large sheets of paper, while parents were able to work through engagement questions in person, with opportunity for more detailed conversations with council staff should they have any questions. The same questions were available online, but the in-person format enabled richer discussion, clarification and informal feedback.

Targeted workshops have also been used where broad, open approaches might present barriers to participation. During the design development for the new Western Avenue Park masterplan project, engagement sessions were delivered with organisations supporting autistic and neurodivergent people, and people with learning disabilities. These sessions took place in familiar and trusted environments and used tactile materials, picture cards and arts-and-crafts-based

activities to enable broad communication and participation. Feedback was shared directly with Engagement and Regeneration Officers, alongside conversations with parents and carers.

Youth democracy has been a central focus of targeted engagement with young people, using informal, youth-friendly approaches that encourage participation and build confidence. Activities such as *mad, sad and glad* exercises were combined with practical democracy tools, including ballot boxes and voting materials, often delivered in school settings. Young people were supported to identify issues that mattered most to them and to take part in mock votes, providing a hands-on experience of how voting works and helping to build understanding of its wider role and impact in society.

To extend reach beyond those who typically take part in council-led engagement, outreach techniques such as 'little bags of happiness' are used. This method involves placing invitation tokens or 'treasure' in targeted locations across neighbourhoods, encouraging people to attend an engagement activity to redeem a small, locally relevant reward such as wildflower seeds or vouchers. The approach can be targeted to specific areas or used more widely and has consistently achieved high return rates of around 85%. It has proven to be a simple but effective way of attracting a broader range of residents and creating opportunities for informal conversations about local priorities.

6. Trusted relationships

Trust is cumulative and must be built over time, through consistency, presence and renewal. Neighbourhood governance requires patience, space for deliberation and an acceptance that participation - and progress - can take time. It requires a collective learning approach which invites multiple perspectives and experiences to shape experimentation and adaptation, rather than expecting to get it 'right first time'.

This learning approach benefits from a blend of 'old hands' and 'new voices'. Longstanding participants bring history, context and trusted relationships, while newer participants introduce fresh perspectives and energy.

Consistency of presence, behaviour and values is critical. Trust grows when councils and partners 'show up' repeatedly, honour commitments, and sustain engagement even through disagreement or slow progress.

Creating space to fold new people into the work helps sustain momentum over time and can unlock issues that have become entrenched. The combination of continuity and renewal strengthens both trust and long-term resilience.

Community Resilience Forum

Significant flooding in 2014 brought extra focus to emergency planning and resilience, and the vital role that connected communities have to play in keeping people safe - both in preparation for and in the event of emergency conditions. Across multiple parishes, community resilience and emergency preparedness plans have been created through existing trusted local networks, drawing on community knowledge alongside professional expertise, with TVBC playing an important role in sign-posting, capacity building and enabling. The Community Resilience Forum is convened bi-annually by TVBC and has been a vital piece of the puzzle in supporting communities to engage, learn from peers and build their confidence in partnership with key partners. It has also enabled parishes to access funding in the form of grants from electricity networks to provide needed equipment that allows them to independently respond in the first phases of an emergency. The end result is close collaboration and trusted relationships which can be relied upon in an emergency.

7. Culture development

Neighbourhood governance succeeds when councils and partners actively work together to shape a collaborative culture. A relational culture does not emerge automatically from formal structures, it requires conscious cultivation. This is true within organisations as well as in partnerships.

This includes modelling behaviours such as openness, care, authenticity and courage; designing meetings and processes that encourage participation rather than bureaucracy; and holding participants accountable for how they show up, not just what they decide.

Test Valley Borough Council's values and behaviours

The council's values and behaviours were co-created through the collective work of the 50 senior managers in the organisation, representing all services. Supported by Collaborate CIC, the work began with staff sharing the values and

behaviours that were important to them and how they could best use them in their work. Through these discussions, colleagues were able to identify which meant the most, what they could relate to and what articulated the type of organisation they wanted to continue to be. Through a series of all staff briefings, all staff were able to engage with the draft values and behaviours and spend time identifying examples of what they currently did, and what they could do in the future, to live those values and behaviours. For some it was easier to give clear examples of how they demonstrate the values and behaviours. For others it took time to identify and connect between their role and responsibilities and the proposed values and behaviours. What was valuable was taking the time to ensure everyone had the chance to do that thinking, to hear and understand the message and start to live the values and behaviours.

<h2 style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Our Values</h2>	<p>KINDNESS We show respect and kindness in how we work together and with others.</p> <p>COLLABORATION We work with partners and communities, reaching beyond our boundaries, because we know we can't solve all the challenges we face on our own. Collaboration can lead to better outcomes.</p> <p>ACCOUNTABILITY We take responsibility for ourselves and our commitments, always try to do what we say we will, and explain if things change.</p> <p>EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION We appreciate and celebrate the differences between us and the value they bring.</p> <p>AUTHENTICITY We act with honesty and integrity, building strong relationships and trust.</p> <p>PRIDE IN OUR DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC SERVICE We value pride in democracy and public services because we are motivated by creating positive impact in our communities and places. We would like this pride to be shared by our communities.</p>	<h2 style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Our Behaviours</h2>	<p>COMMUNICATE AND ENGAGE We communicate across boundaries including teams and services, using different communication styles for different situations.</p> <p>BUILD RELATIONSHIPS Managers and staff are approachable and available to colleagues and residents.</p> <p>LEARN AND ADAPT We believe that learning is part of everyone's role and personal development. We support each other on our personal development journeys.</p> <p>SUPPORT EACH OTHER We care for each other. We are positive in our interactions with each other and in our work.</p> <p>EMPOWER (OR SHARE POWER) We feel empowered to make decisions for ourselves. We invest in creating a supportive culture that enables people to innovate and feel confident to try new things.</p>
			

8. Networks of relationships

Networks of relationships are the plumbing that allows democratic participation to function in practice. Beyond goodwill and personal connections, Councils must resource the practical infrastructure to sustain relationships: community development, coordination capacity and facilitation capabilities, and provide flexible funding that enables local experimentation.

Regular forums, stakeholder networks, cross-sector partnerships and informal spaces for connection form the ecosystem of neighbourhood governance. These structures enable ongoing dialogue, peer learning and collaboration across organisational boundaries. Some of these may be formal council decision-making spaces (e.g. committees), but those alone will not suffice or create the needed relationships for successful neighbourhood governance.

Community Engagement Team and beyond

The Community Team within TVBC was set up in 2011 to support the community councillor role. Informed by ABCD, the team's Engagement Officers work with dedicated communities and councillors, seeking to understand the assets in a place, the priorities and concerns of the people living there and build on them. Therefore, their approach is different in each place. They play a key role in making sure a wide range of voices are heard and connecting community stakeholders to other partners, to funding, to expertise to navigate processes and to each other to for shared learning and peer support.

While in some councils, community engagement might be an add on or within the remit of just one team, TVBC have worked hard to equip all staff in the council to be champions of communities and able to engage with them effectively. Part of this is ensuring that the Engagement Officers are not operating in their own silo but enmeshed with the wider organisation, enabling true two-way dialogue and the ability to share insight and information effectively. But it is also about explicitly giving staff in other services the permission, opportunity and skills to confidently engage with councillors and communities, represent the council and act on its behalf.

A range of internal networks and forums support officers from different parts of the organisation and councillors to work together to share insight, progress and learning about the community council approach. This includes:

- **Member and Community Development Group and the Community Councillor Reference Group:** Member spaces where, with the support of

officers, cross-party representatives develop the community councillor model and reflect on how it works in practice

- **Test Valley Association of Town and Parish Councils:** A vital link between the borough council and the network of town and parish councils across the borough, who are key partners in place-based work. The group meets several times a year with the agenda led by parish and town representatives. An annual joint conference between the Association and TVBC is held once a year dedicating a morning to information sharing and learning together. These strong foundations provide the basis for delivery of practical interventions in local places, such as neighbourhood planning, support for community assets and community resilience and emergency planning.
- **The Senior Managers Forum and Managers Forum** provide safe spaces for managers to reflect and think about how they work at the level place, with an emphasis on disseminating, embedding and developing place-based working across the organisation. Here the emphasis is on networking and sharing experiences, so that colleagues can draw on practical support from one another.
- **The Community Councillor and Place Based Working Network** is a broad group of officers, including all of the Management Team, who meet on a quarterly basis with representatives from all services in the council. The aim of this network is to ensure the council's wider philosophy and approach to supporting the community councillor model and approach to place-based working is understood and embedded in the organisation. This group is an opportunity to share learning, gather input and raise awareness of working with councillors at a place based level across all council services.

9. Participatory decision-making

Neighbourhood governance must move beyond transactional consultation towards embracing the complexity that meaningful participation in decision-making brings. Participation is not simply about voice, it is about shared sense-making and collective responsibility.

This means creating multiple routes for engagement - formal and informal, digital and face-to-face - and deliberately reaching beyond established voices. It includes creating structured spaces and processes where disagreement, competing priorities and different worldviews can be surfaced and worked through constructively. Deliberative approaches, such as citizens' assemblies and structured dialogue informed by shared evidence, enable residents, officers and elected councillors to

engage with difference, test assumptions and reach informed judgements together.

Access to transparent information and a shared evidence base strengthens shared understanding and legitimacy, and reduces polarisation. Participation becomes collective sense-making rather than opinion-gathering. When people see their perspectives taken seriously and decisions grounded in transparent information, legitimacy strengthens and cynicism and polarisation of views reduce.

Enhancing participation through deliberative democracy

Deliberative democracy allows for discussion and debate among citizens as part of decision-making, not simply voting. Test Valley has pioneered the use of deliberative processes alongside traditional representative democracy (elected Councillors) over the last seven years. Citizen engagement in this way does not replace formal decision-making by elected councillors, but is seen as a means of generating a deeper and more representative understanding of what matters to communities, which gives elected representatives a clear mandate to act in the interests of their whole place. These methods allow residents to review data, hear diverse perspectives, and deliberate, turning complex, sometimes controversial topics into informed community recommendations.

In 2019, TVBC was one of three authorities to pilot a citizens' assembly through the national Innovation in Democracy Programme. Citizens assemblies typically consist of a series of workshops where evidence and insight about a problem are presented to participants, discussed and explored, and a series of recommendations or preferences made based on consensus. Participants are recruited to be reflective of the population of the community but randomly selected (rather than volunteers or existing stakeholders) and are compensated for their time.

Two citizens' assemblies have been held as part of the Romsey Future work but deliberative processes have also been used in the development of the Corporate Plan. Following a borough-wide survey to create an evidence base of headline issues, a series of deliberative workshops were held to delve deeper into the responses and get underneath the issues raised. These involved around 100 residents reflecting the demographic make-up of residents in the borough. Through facilitated debate, sharing their lived experience and considering a range of evidence, participants developed 12 statements related to the key questions: What makes communities work well as thriving places, where people can live fulfilled lives? And What role should the council be playing to make this a reality in Test Valley?. These statements, and further engagements and discussions, were used to shape the published Corporate Plan.

While these processes are often supported by external organisations who bring particular expertise as well as the neutrality to hold the spaces on the right terms, TVBC staff have been closely involved in these processes and in doing so have been upskilled, taking on roles as table facilitators as their skills and confidence have grown. This both brings down the cost of facilitating these exercises and enables similar facilitation, discussion and evidence presentation skills to be transferred into other contexts and the council's wider approach.

10. Investment in capacity and capabilities

Neighbourhood governance is about translating connection and dialogue into tangible impact.

This requires investment - in councils' enabling capacity to coordinate and support delivery, in resourcing community development workers and in building capabilities and shared language across the organisation. Skills such as facilitation, systems leadership and organisational development are key.

It also requires access to funds for communities to start small, experiment and build relationships and trust, as well as the ability to deploy or leverage greater levels of resources in line with community priorities.

Grant funding for neighbourhood governance and place-based working

A range of grant funds support the community councillor model at TVBC, designed to support communities to achieve their priorities.

The newly created Community Delivery Fund is the most innovative of TVBC's grant opportunities. It was born from a desire to accelerate spending on community projects and expects to fund up to £2m of investment by June 2027, in preparation for the transition of TVBC into a new unitary authority as part of local government reorganisation. The first awards were made in January 2026, with over half a million pounds awarded since then.

The fund is distinctive in its deliberate approach to being as financially flexible as possible and acting as a catalyst for the organisation as a whole working more closely with communities and providing support beyond grant funding. Rather than an open competitive process, officers have drawn on their knowledge and relationships with communities and connections with Ward members to identify

potential projects which meet four key elements:

- Evidence of community need and community-led
- Quality of planning
- Long-term community impact and sustainability
- Deliverability

Community groups and parish councils are then supported to build their proposals to whatever extent they want and need, including the provision of initial funding to develop a realistic proposal and return for further investment.

As important as the funding are the five place-based working groups comprising Directors and Engagement Officers who work to support the projects through their proposals and delivery. Together, they can quickly and effectively leverage resources from across the organisation to support the community projects, and provide the connections and permissions to support practical and responsive place-based working.

The process is flexible and transparent, with the aim being to get the best results for the community. Match funding is at the discretion of the Community Delivery Fund Board, who rather than applying pre-set funding limit review the proportionality on a case-by-case basis, look for equivalent commitment from the community group and other partners, aiming to get meaningful projects over the line.

At the other end of the scale, Community Councillor grants were introduced as part of the community councillor model and focus on giving ward councillors the ability to make a difference in their ward. Grants of up to £1,000 can fund up to 2/3rds of the value of hyper-local community projects and prove a powerful enabler for community action and building networks and capacity. They are a useful tool for enabling councillors to connect with their communities, with Community Engagement Officers often playing a bridging, introductory role. Multi-ward grants are also available up to £2,000 to support activity spread over more than one ward, such as in larger towns.

At various times, these have been complemented by limited term micro grants of up to £500, which can fund up to 100% of the value of the project. The process to access the funding is deliberately light-touch, proportionate to the funds available. These were deployed in response to the covid pandemic and the cost of living crisis to cover basic things that enable volunteer community groups to take action in their communities, and while such small amounts might not go far in terms of funding council resources, in the hand of a group of volunteers it can

make a significant difference. These grants have also been used to support community celebration around the Queen's Jubilee and Coronation. Their purpose links back to the principles of ABCD, creating shared experiences and cultural experiences that nurture connections within communities.

The Community Asset Fund has also existed for a long time and supports larger scale projects that enhance or deliver new community facilities. Grants of up to £25,000 and 50% of the value of the project have supported extensions to village halls, AV equipment, play parks and gym trails. At the heart of the application process is a focus on evidence of community need, encouraging and supporting prospective applicants to engage with their communities to determine priorities.

Three case studies: A summary

To illustrate these enabling conditions in practice, we highlight three case studies from across Test Valley. Key elements are summarised below.

Each case study offers just a snapshot of a distinct, diverse and evolving place, or network of places.

Area	Andover Vision	Romsey Future	Villages & Rural Areas
Context	Test Valley's largest town, experiencing significant growth and new neighbourhood development; diverse communities.	Historic market town with strong civic pride and an active network of local organisations.	27% of residents live in villages and parishes with strong local stewardship.
Distinctive feature	A networked approach to neighbourhood governance	Co-ordinating a strong and active civic ecosystem	Hyper-local assets and distributed leadership
Key enablers	Commitment to community partnership; Shared story of place; Collaborative place-based leadership; Culture development; Equity and inclusion; Trusted relationships	Commitment to community partnership; Collaborative place-based leadership; Community before party politics; Trusted relationships; Networks of relationships; Participatory decision-making	Commitment to community partnership; Shared story of place; Collaborative place-based leadership; Trusted relationships; Networks of relationships; Investment in capacity and capabilities

Andover Vision: Networked Governance across a town

[Andover Vision](#) is a long-standing partnership bringing together residents, community groups, businesses and public bodies to shape the future of Andover.

Through extensive public engagement, partners co-created a shared Vision strategy that articulates long-term ambitions for the town and provides a mandate for collective action.

Rather than a council-owned plan, Andover Vision operates as a **networked platform**: a space where organisations come together to align effort, build trust and progress projects rooted in community priorities. While there is senior sponsorship at both an officer and political level, many participants would identify the local Community Development Workers as the council leads of Andover Vision, who work to nurture and facilitate grassroots engagement as well as supporting community events.

About Andover

Andover is a growing market town in the north of Test Valley and is home to around two-fifths of the borough's population. The town's population is projected to increase by around 5.6% between 2020 and 2027, reaching approximately 53,700 residents, with significant housing development underway including several new neighbourhoods.

Compared with other parts of the borough, and indeed the national average, Andover has a younger and more diverse population profile. It also includes some of the most deprived areas in Test Valley, particularly in the south-east of the town, where several neighbourhoods fall within the 10% most deprived areas nationally (English Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019).

As a large, complex urban centre, Andover requires a specific approach to neighbourhood governance - one that works at scale while remaining rooted in the lived experience of its communities.

Focus: A networked approach to neighbourhood governance

Andover Vision operates as a network of relationships, rather than a formal committee or a new tier of governance. Statutory and commissioned services, larger charities (such as Mind), community organisations and local businesses are key contributors to the Andover Vision and use it as a shared framework to coordinate activity and respond to emerging needs. Regular and extensive public engagement and targeted outreach to specific groups has brought residents and other community members close to the work too.

In this network, the council plays a critical enabling role, convening, facilitating and resourcing where appropriate. But, crucially, projects are led by the organisations best placed to deliver them. This allows Andover Vision to function as a platform for collaboration rather than a programme controlled from the top.

Enablers in action

Andover Vision illustrates how effective neighbourhood governance is enabled not by formal structures alone, but by the conditions that shape how people think, relate and act together. This section illustrates how some of the key enabling conditions have been expressed in practice.

1. Commitment to community partnership

From its inception, Andover Vision was rooted in the belief that the future of the town should be shaped *with* the community, not delivered *to* it. It emerged from a recognition that regeneration and town centre change could not succeed through top-down planning alone.

Council leaders, officers, businesses, voluntary organisations and residents were invited to see themselves as co-stewards of Andover's future. This required letting go of institutional control and embracing shared responsibility for complex, long-term change. The approach moved beyond consultation towards genuine collaboration, recognising that thriving places are co-produced through sustained relationships.

Importantly, this mindset acknowledged complexity rather than avoiding it. Andover Vision engaged with contested issues about the town centre, identity and development, accepting that collaborative progress would be iterative rather than linear.

"This isn't about the council doing something to Andover - it's about all of us shaping what happens next."

2. A shared story of place

Andover Vision was anchored in a strong narrative about the town: its history, its assets and its potential. The process sought to articulate a shared story that different stakeholders could see themselves in, providing a unifying frame for action.

By grounding discussions in Andover's identity and lived experience, the Vision created the legitimacy to act. It worked at a scale that residents recognised and cared about, enabling conversations about regeneration to feel personal rather than abstract. The town centre became both a symbol and a focus - a shared space through which wider aspirations for community wellbeing, economic vitality and social connection could be expressed.

This emphasis on place allowed diverse actors, from businesses to community groups, to coalesce around a common narrative, even where specific priorities differed.

"It's about Andover - its history, its strengths, and what we want it to become. That's what brought people together."

3. Collaborative place-based leadership

Andover Vision demonstrates an adaptive, place-based approach to leadership in action. Here, the council played a convening role, providing legitimacy, coordination and access to resources, while enabling others to step forward. Leadership was distributed rather than concentrated.

Political and managerial leaders aligned behind the Vision, signalling commitment and providing continuity. At the same time, partners from outside the council were empowered to shape priorities and influence direction. This clarity about roles - the council as enabler and steward, others as co-creators - sustained trust and momentum.

Cross-sector collaboration reduced the risk of siloed initiatives and reinforced a sense that Andover's future was a shared endeavour rather than a council programme.

"Without the council it wouldn't have happened - but it was developed by all the key stakeholders."

4. Equity and inclusion

Inclusion is central to Andover Vision. Engagement extends the realms of consultation to include businesses, voluntary organisations, residents and groups not traditionally present in formal planning processes.

The Vision provides a container in which potentially competing agendas can be surfaced and negotiated constructively. Multiple methods are used to enable participation, from structured workshops to open events, to partnering closely with partners trusted by young people, vulnerable residents or marginalised communities. The diversity of processes, often facilitated by a committed team of Community Development workers, create varied entry points for involvement, aiming not only to gather views but to understand underlying priorities and aspirations.

This approach has strengthened the partnership's confidence and legitimacy to unlock investment and deliver meaningful outcomes and ensured that proposals are grounded in lived realities.

"When you care about people, you enable them to feel seen and heard. Sometimes that's all they want - just to have a voice."

5. Trusted relationships

Trust in Andover Vision was not immediate; it developed through consistent action over time. Leaders demonstrated commitment by sustaining the Vision beyond initial launch phases and by embedding its priorities into formal strategies and investment decisions.

Participants saw that their contributions informed tangible outputs, reinforcing credibility. The council's continued presence and tangible, consistent actions - showing up, holding regular meetings, communicating progress and acknowledging challenges - have played a significant role in enabling relationships to deepen.

This has required patience. Regeneration timelines are long, so expectations must be managed. By maintaining openness and continuity, Andover Vision built trust incrementally, enabling the partnership to weather periods of uncertainty and maintain momentum.

"Consistency is key - frequency over a prolonged period of time. It's a slow burn. You're playing the long game."

6. Culture development

The culture of Andover Vision was intentionally shaped to be different from traditional committee-based processes.

Meetings are intentionally designed to feel different to traditional local government forums. Behaviours such as openness, curiosity and mutual respect are modelled and expected. Authentic connection and informal participation are prioritised over formal process. Food is provided so people know their time is valued, creative and varied facilitation methods support engagement, and space is created for genuine conversation.

This intentional design, initially established by council staff but increasingly held by participants, reduces hierarchy and enables people to engage across organisational and political boundaries. It creates a space where disagreement can be surfaced productively and where stakeholders feel ownership of outcomes.

“Don’t get hung up on structures, bureaucracy, funding or constitutions - it’s about getting together and meeting people and rolling with the punches.”

Tangible outcomes for communities

People we spoke to across Andover emphasise that the most powerful impact lies in the culture and sense of community that Andover Vision has created. By bringing together people from across sectors and perspectives, the partnership has strengthened civic participation and built relationships that enable difficult issues to be explored constructively. This relational foundation allows the town to tackle complex challenges while strengthening community connection and shared purpose. Through the events and community engagement activities that Andover Vision enables, this culture is felt by people in their day to day experience of where they live - whether they are explicitly aware of Andover Vision or not.

However, the impact of Andover Vision can also be seen in tangible outcomes, including new partnerships, investment and cross-sector initiatives such those set out below.

Andover Health Hub

The development of the Andover Health Hub illustrates the power of sustained, relational neighbourhood governance. Earlier attempts to co-locate services had faltered amid organisational silos. Over time, relationships forged through Andover Vision – accelerated by collaboration during the pandemic – enabled partners to move beyond individual interests towards a genuinely integrated model. The resulting hub brings together GP practices and wider health and community services in a single, shared space designed around residents rather than institutions.

The success of Andover Health Hub (shortlisted in the Public/Public Partnerships category of the [LGC Awards 2026](#)) proves that effective neighbourhood governance is not primarily about formal structures. It is about creating the relational, cultural and practical conditions in which communities, partners and councils can act together.

Youth-Led Initiatives

The Vision demonstrates how neighbourhood governance can empower communities not only to be consulted, but to lead. Council investment in programmes such as Future Leaders has enabled young people to shape projects under the Vision banner, including ‘Andover Anarchy’ a youth-designed festival and various enterprise initiatives such as the young entrepreneurs market.

The Cultural Sharing Forum

The Cultural Sharing Forum was born out of TVBC Engagement Officers work with community leaders from Muslim, Nepalese and Chinese communities in Andover, which have historically been the more established and formalised groups in the area. Collaborative working through the pandemic developed into conversations about wider aspirations to improve inclusion in Andover and embrace and celebrate its diversity. Affiliated to but independent of Andover Vision, the Cultural Sharing Forum aims to embrace and better understand the cultures in Andover and promote cultural awareness, bringing people together and making space for all cultures to interact and identify shared aims to promote inclusivity and integration. Through a programme of inclusive events which reflect the diversity of Andover, and the connections to Andover Vision, rates of engagement in consultation and service development across a range of public services have increased. And most importantly, diverse communities have had the opportunity to be involved in conversations that they feel passionately about and in areas where they would like to affect change.

Romsey Future: Coordinating a civic ecosystem

[Romsey Future](#) is a long-standing, community partnership bringing together residents, community organisations, businesses and elected councillors to shape the future of Romsey since 2013. Established to create a shared vision for the town, it has evolved into a dynamic forum for delivering that vision - coordinating projects, attracting and awarding funding and strengthening relationships across sectors.

Romsey itself is a market town with its own strong identity and a large and active - though historically somewhat disconnected - civil society. Romsey Future operates as a vehicle for both articulating shared ambition and the coordination to achieve it, creating an inclusive forum where different perspectives can be surfaced, challenged and aligned around what is best for the town.

Romsey Future demonstrates that neighbourhood governance requires more than structural reform. Its commitment to cross-sector relationships, deliberate convening and a willingness to experiment with democratic practice is an example of how council-led but community-rooted governance can shape a place.

About Romsey

A historic market town in the south of the borough, Romsey is the second largest town in the borough. The population is expected to rise by 10% to 23,640 by 2027, when around 29% of the population are anticipated to be aged 65 and over. The historic, natural and built environment set Romsey apart from other places, and preserving this historic character while exploring creative ways in which compatible enhancements can be made is key as the town develops further.

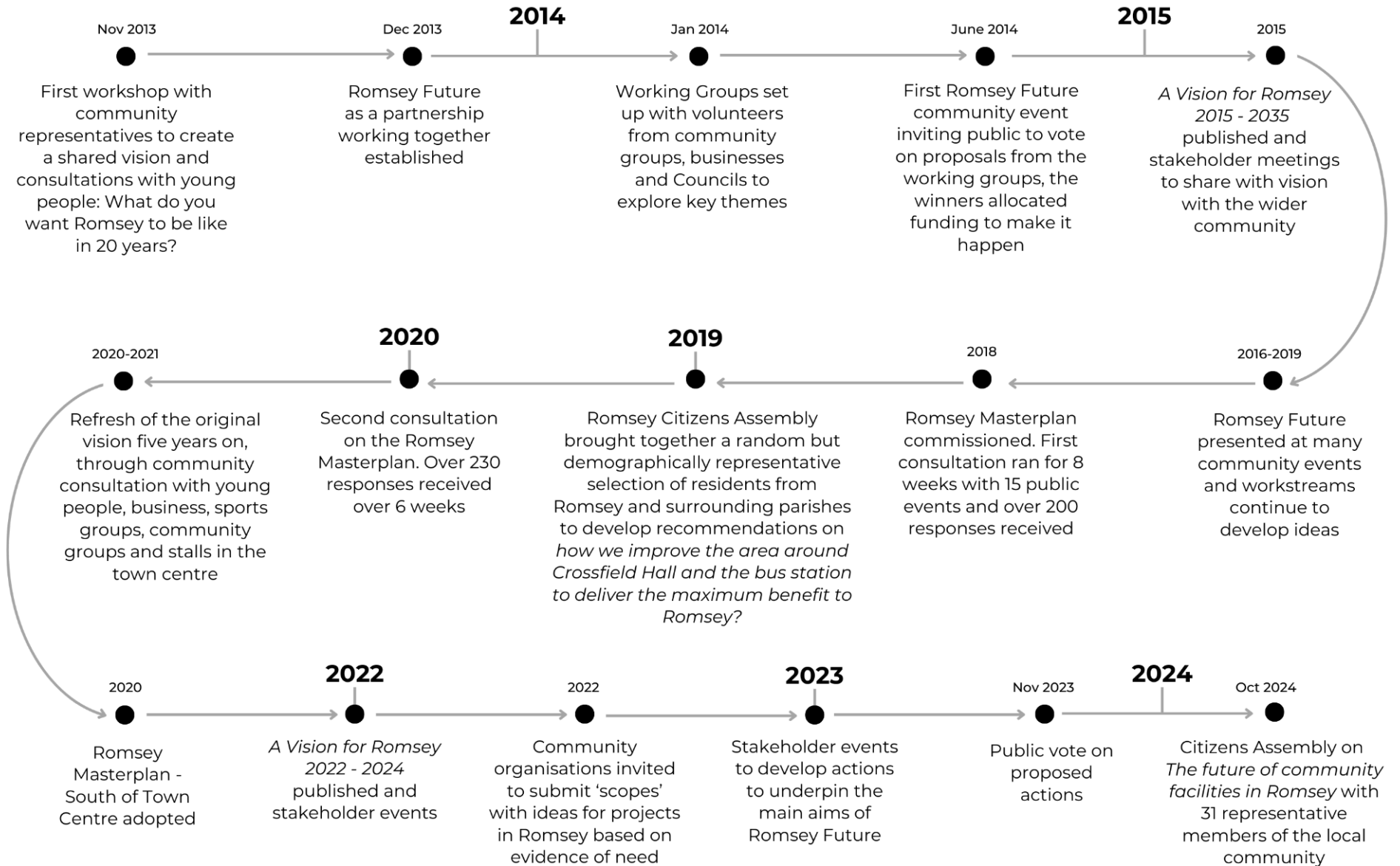
Focus: Co-ordinating a strong and active civic ecosystem

While the wide range of active organisations operating in Romsey is a strength, aligning and coordinating activity around a shared ambition had historically been a challenge.

Romsey Future was established to address this risk of fragmentation. In its early days, an independent facilitator convened a diverse group of stakeholders and asked a simple but powerful question: if we all do our jobs well, how will the people of Romsey benefit? Participants were required to 'take off their organisational badges' and think collectively. This framing set the tone for what followed: a partnership rooted in shared purpose.

Romsey Future walks a careful tightrope to balance the needs of the town's strong and vocal community sector, alongside democratically elected councillors with formal decision-making responsibilities and funding accountabilities. To achieve this, it has used citizens assemblies alongside representative democracy to identify and deliver on what the community wants in a way that is aligned to the ambitions of the town and borough council.

Key milestones



Enablers in action

Romsey Future provides a mature and evolving example of neighbourhood governance in practice. The partnership has not removed complexity or disagreement from local life - it has created the conditions to work with them productively. The following highlights how key enabling conditions show up in practice.

1. Commitment to community partnership

At its core, Romsey Future is rooted in a belief that the town's future should be shaped collectively. From the outset, the framing deliberately shifted the focus from institutional interests to shared stewardship of place.

Romsey Future does not hold its own funding pot or formal authority. Instead, it operates as a vehicle to align influence, resources and energy around shared priorities. This reflects an understanding that thriving places are co-produced, not delivered by a single institution.

"The principle of Romsey Future is great - it's bringing people together to look at what the town needs and how we can sort it out."

2. Collaborative place-based leadership

Romsey Future is convened and supported by the Borough Council, but not controlled by it. This balance between authority and community is carefully maintained and negotiated.

Leadership is distributed, with councillors, officers and community figures all playing clear and active roles. This clarity about roles - Romsey Future is convened and supported by the council, and shaped and energised by the community - is essential. Its partners recognise that without council support (logistics, officer time or political access) the partnership would struggle to sustain itself; while top-down control would undermine the trust they have worked so hard to create.

"The idea that the administration would hand over that much influence on a regeneration scheme would be laughable in other areas.... You don't have to control everything."

3. Cross-party approach

In a borough where different political parties dominate different areas, Romsey Future provides a neutral space where party politics fade into the background. Councillors from different parties collaborate around shared priorities for the town, rather than partisan agendas.

This has created resilience: the partnership has access to resources that may not otherwise be available, and is now sufficiently embedded to ride the waves of political change.

Participants describe Romsey Future as one of the few spaces where collaborative working consistently outweighs partisan positioning.

“Party politics only pops up on special occasions - elections and council meetings. Not at Romsey Future - we work well together.”

4. Trusted relationships

Romsey Future operates within a complex three-tier local government system, where funding and approvals can be slow. Partners are candid about the frustration this creates. Progress is often incremental, and visible outcomes may lag behind ambition.

What distinguishes the partnership is persistence. Members have “kept at it”, sustaining relationships, returning to difficult issues and maintaining shared purpose even when external constraints delay delivery. Over time, this consistency has built credibility.

Trust in Romsey Future has been earned gradually: through repeated engagement, transparency about constraints and visible commitment to the town’s long-term future.

“So many hoops the local council has to jump through - things take a long time.”

5. Networks of relationships

Romsey Future is as much about building relationships as delivering projects.

Leaders go out to meet people, attend events and stay connected to community life. Regular stakeholder events bring together organisations from across civic, faith,

business and voluntary sectors. These gatherings strengthen networks surface emerging issues and enable two-way communication between councils and the wider community.

In a context of increasing cynicism about politics, this visible commitment to relationships and transparency has been described as a 'beacon of hope'.

"Romsey Future has brought groups together whether or not they agree - it's a forum for bringing us all together."

6. Participatory decision-making

Romsey Future has been deliberate in broadening participation beyond the most vocal stakeholders. The partnership recognises the risk that established or confident voices can dominate. In response, it has used deliberative methods, including Citizens' Assemblies, to surface wider perspectives and ground decisions in shared evidence.

These processes create structured space for disagreement and complexity. Rather than seeking superficial consensus, Romsey Future allows differences to be aired and worked through constructively. This willingness to "stay in the room" has enabled movement on contentious issues, including town centre regeneration and growth.

By combining community voice with transparent access to information, Romsey Future strengthens both the quality and legitimacy of its decisions.

"Some people walked in the room determined about the answer — then walked out totally different when they'd been presented with the facts."

Tangible outcomes for communities

The relational and cultural shifts that have emerged through the partnership are significant. Regular opportunities for dialogue have strengthened trust across sectors and created a space where disagreement can be navigated constructively. Over time, this has nurtured a stronger sense of civic ownership in Romsey, with community leaders stepping into wider civic roles, including some participants going on to become elected councillors themselves.

Romsey Future has also generated more visible outcomes, including progress on regeneration priorities and stronger collaboration between organisations across the town:

- Development of Romsey Masterplan - South of Town Centre with significant public engagement, including the Citizens Assembly. This was not an uncontroversial issue, with different community groups having different views and some perspectives quite entrenched. However, by using a deliberative process, it was possible to represent more and different voices and consider shared evidence which supported collective decision making. The Masterplan now provides a basis upon which further development and investment can be leveraged, with the confidence that it has wide community support.
- Romsey Flood Alleviation scheme, initiated by Romsey Future, was completed in 2022 bringing significant expenditure into Romsey to protect the area from flood events.
- Romsey Disabled People Partnership awarded funding by Romsey Future to develop and deliver disability awareness training for business and organisations in the area to highlight how we can all best serve members of our community living with a disability.
- In collaboration with Test Valley Borough Council, Romsey Future was allocated £100k of UK Shared Prosperity Fund, funded by the UK Government. In consultation with local organisations and groups, grants were awarded by Romsey Future to seven different projects including:
 - Wilder Romsey were awarded funds to help provide kit and equipment to better allow volunteers to repair and maintain the canal.
 - Romsey Town Council (RTC) were awarded funds to reinstate power to the bollards on Church Place to enable community events and markets to have access to power.
 - Romsey Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society (RAODS) were awarded funds to refurbish the Green Room - to create another smaller show space, and enable increased numbers of visitors to events and shows
- Scoping and delivery of community projects including Improvements to footpaths into Romsey; Half Term Hangouts; Dragonfly Power.
- Community events such as the Teenage Market.

Beyond town centres: Distributed leadership in diverse communities

Just over a quarter (27%) of the population of Test Valley live in villages and other settlements across the borough. Actively engaging these residents in neighbourhood governance is as important as in the larger urban areas of Andover and Romsey, and while some of these initiatives are newer, they are having an impact.

Neighbourhood governance outside urban centres takes multiple forms. Test Valley's rural villages, such as Broughton and Lockerley, and newer edge-of-town neighbourhoods, such as Augusta Park, are proud of their distinct identity.

At this hyper-local level, parish councils are stewarding green spaces, future-proofing local assets while preserving heritage and character. Volunteers regenerating century-old halls, trustees reimagining new community centres, and residents writing statutory neighbourhood plans.

Alongside these communities sit enabling borough-wide partnerships such as the Test Valley Association of Parish and Town Councils which provides a regular space for parish and town councils to come together to discuss shared challenges, exchange experience and explore issues affecting their communities.

There are also a range of other local networks that connect different communities working on similar projects or interests. The council also plays an active role in connecting these local networks through:

- **Community Engagement Officers (CEOs)** who collectively cover the whole borough, including working across villages and neighbourhoods, building relationships and connecting groups with one another. The geographical 'patch' of these officers is co-terminus with ward boundaries and they work extremely closely with ward councillors.
- **Connector networks**, such as the Village Shop Network and the Test Valley Community Association Network (TVCAN) which brings together and supports community associations which manage a venue such as village hall committees. These link community-run assets and enable shared learning.
- **Cross-parish partnerships and forums**, which create opportunities for collaboration beyond individual village boundaries, including self-formed partnerships such as the Pan-Parish River Pollution Forum, in which about a dozen parish councils have joined together around a shared concern. This has proven to be inspiration for the newer, smaller A342 forum, which has

brought parishes together around concerns on the impact of increased traffic on a major commuter route.

These networks operate as a connective layer across the borough's rural and hyper-local governance landscape. By valuing the distinctiveness of each place while creating opportunities to connect and scale learning, they enable communities to work with what already exists - strengthening local leadership, sharing experience and empowering residents to shape their places in ways that reflect local priorities.

Focus: Hyper-local assets and distributed leadership

Across all the groups we spoke to, governance is anchored in places people recognise - village halls, scout huts, shops and new-build community centres. Not just physical buildings, these places provide crucial social infrastructure where identity, memory and decision-making converge.

In Broughton, forward-thinking energy projects sit alongside a local shop (with over 100 volunteers), the parish council, church and village hall. All work together as a tightly interwoven ecosystem. In Lockerley, regeneration of the village hall reflects both generational change and a determination to revive participation, while residents speak with pride about their green spaces. In Augusta Park, trustees and managers are consciously shifting from running a building 'like a business' to nurturing it as a 'living, growing entity'.

Enablers in action

Neighbourhood governance beyond major urban centres looks and feels different. This work is rooted in volunteer energy, parish councils, village halls, community shops alongside borough-wide partnerships, infrastructure and resilience groups. It is deeply relational and highly place-specific.

The following sections illustrate how the enabling conditions show up in practice across what was once a new (but is now 10 year old) neighbourhood development at Augusta Park, the villages of Broughton and Lockerley, and through work that various parishes have done on emergency planning and community resilience, supported by the Community Resilience Forum.

1. Commitment to community partnership

Across these settings, there is a consistent belief that thriving communities are co-produced. Council leaders emphasise humility, recognising that institutions cannot do or solve everything and that local knowledge and skills are indispensable.

Attempts to impose rigid, one-size-fits-all structures are widely seen as counterproductive.

Instead, the prevailing mindset is asset-based and iterative: start with what exists, build from local strengths, and experiment together. This means accepting the messiness and complexity of collaborative work.

"It's not the money, it's the mindset."

2. Shared story of place

In rural and parish contexts, identity is powerful. Governance is anchored in places people recognise - a local village, a parish boundary or a new housing development building its own sense of belonging.

In Broughton and Lockerley, residents speak of pride in being "a proper village," while also acknowledging the need to adapt and future-proof local assets. In Augusta Park, trustees of the Community Centre are consciously shaping a new story of place for a growing community. The Community Resilience Forum, too, is grounded in lived geography - centred on local people knowing which roads flood, who may need support, and what community assets can be mobilised.

"We are still a proper village in the old-fashioned sense."

"There's a very strong community spirit and resilience within the village."

3. Collaborative place-based leadership

Leadership in these contexts is enabling rather than directive. Community engagement officers, parish councillors and ward members act as navigators and convenors, opening doors, interpreting systems and connecting local ambition to institutional resource.

Crucially, this leadership is both relational and practical. Officers "turn up", answer the phone, attend meetings and act as interpreters of the system. Roles flex according to context. Sometimes the council leads; sometimes the community does. What matters is clarity and collaboration rather than control.

This enabling stance allows community energy to flourish while providing scaffolding where required. In Augusta Park, relationships with engagement officers gradually shifted trustees' confidence and expanded ambition. In Broughton, officer presence unlocked grant funding and planning advice. Within MCDG, councillors

are positioned not merely as decision-makers but as convenors and advocates, rooted in their wards.

“Being present makes such a difference. It opens doors to so many things you didn’t have a clue about.”

“This isn’t something that happens by chance - it requires leadership and a group of councillors who want to do it.”

4. Networks of relationships

Networks of relationships are the plumbing that enables hyper-local democracy to function beyond formal meetings. Formal structures matter - parish councils, resilience forums, ward meetings - but it is the repeated, low-key encounters that sustain momentum.

Governance capacity is built through relationships. The Community Resilience Forum provides borough-level convening that strengthens peer learning between parishes. Volunteers gain confidence by sharing experience and testing ideas together. Informal connections - knowing who lives “two doors down” - are the foundation of effective response.

“The root of community resilience is connection. It’s knowing who lives two doors down.”

“It’s a two-way communication device — not just spoken to, go and talk to people as well.”

5. Trusted relationships

Non-urban neighbourhood governance is highly dependent on volunteer capacity. Energy can surge and wane with life stages, personality dynamics and generational shifts. Sustaining progress therefore requires patience and consistency. Trust grows when councils and communities continue to show up, even when progress is incremental.

When long-standing volunteers stepped back from Lockerley’s hall regeneration project, new volunteers were supported to step forward. Participants acknowledged that personality dynamics and informal authority shape outcomes as much as formal structures. Sustaining progress requires patience, celebrating small wins and adjusting pace - sometimes slowing down to work at the pace of trust; at other moments going with the flow when the pieces slot into place and ensuring too much bureaucracy doesn’t slow things down

“Local neighbourhood governance is hugely dependent on personalities and individuals.”

“You need to walk before you run.”

6. Investment in capacity and capabilities

Connection alone is not enough: shifting from consultation to co-production requires skill and infrastructure. Effective neighbourhood governance requires investment - in officer time, facilitation, funding streams and skill development. Investment enables volunteer energy to translate into sustained impact, and builds the confidence and capability of people to do more in their communities.

The creation of communities teams, ward budgets, the Community Asset Fund and parish-level resilience planning demonstrates tangible, practical commitment. Training local residents as community researchers in Lockerley and supporting parish leads to develop and test resilience plans builds long-term capability.

“Shifting from consultation to co-production means ‘what can we create together?’”

Tangible outcomes for communities

Across Test Valley’s villages and neighbourhoods, people consistently emphasise that the deeper impact of their approach lies in the strength and vibrancy of community life itself. When residents come together to shape their places, they build relationships, reduce isolation and strengthen the social fabric that underpins prevention and wellbeing.

The council’s primary role is to support these connections, showing up where communities already gather and connecting places facing similar challenges so that ideas, confidence and leadership can grow. However, the impact of this shared stewardship approach is also visible in more tangible ways: community assets protected, resilience plans developed and local initiatives delivered.

Community Resilience Plans

Significant flooding in 2014 brought extra focus to emergency planning and resilience, and the vital role that connected communities have to play in keeping people safe - both in preparation for and in the event of emergency conditions. Across multiple parishes, community resilience and emergency preparedness plans have been created through existing trusted local networks, drawing on community

knowledge alongside professional expertise, with TVBC playing an important role in sign-posting, capacity building and enabling. The Community Resilience Forum is convened bi-annually by TVBC and has been a vital piece of the puzzle in supporting communities to engage, learn from peers and build their confidence in partnership with key partners. It has also enabled parishes to access funding in the form of grants from electricity networks to provide needed equipment that allows them to independently respond in the first phases of an emergency. The end result is close collaboration and trusted relationships which can be relied upon in an emergency.

Developer-funded Community Development Workers and facilities

Across Test Valley, particular attention has been paid to supporting new housing communities to become active and self-sustaining, and as capable of establishing their own priorities and delivering local solutions as more established neighbourhoods.

At Augusta Park, a new community on the edge of Andover, property developer contributions funded a community centre at the heart of the community, close to local shops and a park. The developer also funded a dedicated Community Development Worker (CDW), during the community's early years. The CDW worked alongside residents and partners to listen to local priorities, build relationships and support the development of a varied programme of activities at the community centre. They also helped establish the Augusta Park Community Association to sustain this work once the role ended. Ten years on, the volunteer trustee team continues to build community connection and local leadership, bringing energy and ownership to the neighbourhood.

Community Researchers

Through a joint programme between TVBC and University of Southampton, five community researchers have been recruited and trained in Lockerley and Barton Stacey. Recognising that effective policy must be grounded in place-based insight and community voice, this work equipped residents with the tools and confidence to explore topics that matter to them, training them to generate their own evidence, investigate concerns rooted in lived experience, and present findings in ways that directly inform local strategy and decision-making. The initial projects focused on understanding how people feel about the places they live - what they value and what they want to change. This work generated not only useful insight on these key areas, but long-lasting confidence, skills and connections which individual residents, communities and the council can continue to draw on over time.

Neighbourhood Plans

There are ten Made (Adopted) Neighbourhood Plans with a further five being prepared and ten areas which have made an application for their neighbourhood area to be designated by the Parish Council or a Neighbourhood Steering Group, as the first step in preparing a Neighbourhood Plan. These planning processes engage local people around the future of their place, supporting them to be active participants in shaping change. Often, this process builds the connections and capabilities among communities and with the council, increasing their engagement and enthusiasm to do more in the place where they live.

Realising the promise of neighbourhood governance: 5 practical steps

Effective neighbourhood governance is achievable, but it requires councils to think and act differently. The experience of Test Valley demonstrates that when place-based leadership, shared stewardship and relational practice are backed by practical investment and cross-party commitment, neighbourhood governance can strengthen democratic legitimacy, enhance service responsiveness and rebuild civic trust. It is a key enabler of wider public service reform focused on place-based, relational, preventative approaches.

What does this mean for other Local Authorities?

All places differ and there is no one-size-fits-all approach - the practical application of the enabling conditions varies even within the three Test Valley case studies. However, this does not limit their wider relevance.

We believe that the enabling conditions and the broader conclusion that effective neighbourhood governance depends primarily on cultural, relational and leadership shifts, rather than structural reform, are applicable more widely. They are consistent with insights from examples of effective neighbourhood working in other parts of the country in a range of different local contexts.

We offer this report as a source of inspiration for other places looking to develop meaningful neighbourhood governance. The framing and application of the enabling conditions will look different in different places, but overall, we believe that they are a useful guide and provocation to help councils seize this opportunity. We hope this report becomes part of wider efforts nationally to learn and share about effective approaches to neighbourhood governance.

A roadmap for change

Learning from the experience of Test Valley, it is possible to see a road map for change. We have identified five practical steps any council can take to embed the enabling conditions and plot a path to change.

If these conditions are embedded, neighbourhood governance can become a powerful platform for democratic renewal - enabling communities, councils and partners to shape the future of their places together.

5 practical steps to make it happen

1 Start with culture and shared stewardship

Neighbourhood governance begins with a mindset shift. Councils must move from “doing to” communities towards shared stewardship of place, recognising residents and community organisations as co-producers of local outcomes rather than consultees.

2

2 Work with the ecosystem that already exists

Most places already contain a web of partnerships, community groups and informal networks. Mapping and strengthening this relational infrastructure is often more effective than creating new governance bodies.

3

3 Anchor governance in places people recognise

Neighbourhood governance should reflect real communities and lived geography - towns, villages, estates and neighbourhoods - rather than administrative convenience. Legitimacy grows when decision-making aligns with local identity and shared narratives of place.

4

4 Equip councillors as community convenors

Ward councillors are uniquely placed to bridge institutions and communities. Councils should support this role with local data, officer backing, facilitation skills and small-scale funding, enabling councillors to convene conversations and respond constructively to local priorities.

5

5 Invest in relationships, capacity and patience

Neighbourhood governance is relational work. It requires sustained investment in community development, facilitation skills, cross-sector collaboration and community capability, alongside patience to build trust over time.

If these conditions are embedded, neighbourhood governance can become a powerful platform for democratic renewal - enabling communities, councils and partners to shape the future of their places together.