

Neighbourhood Governance in Practice: Lessons from Test Valley for Democratic Renewal

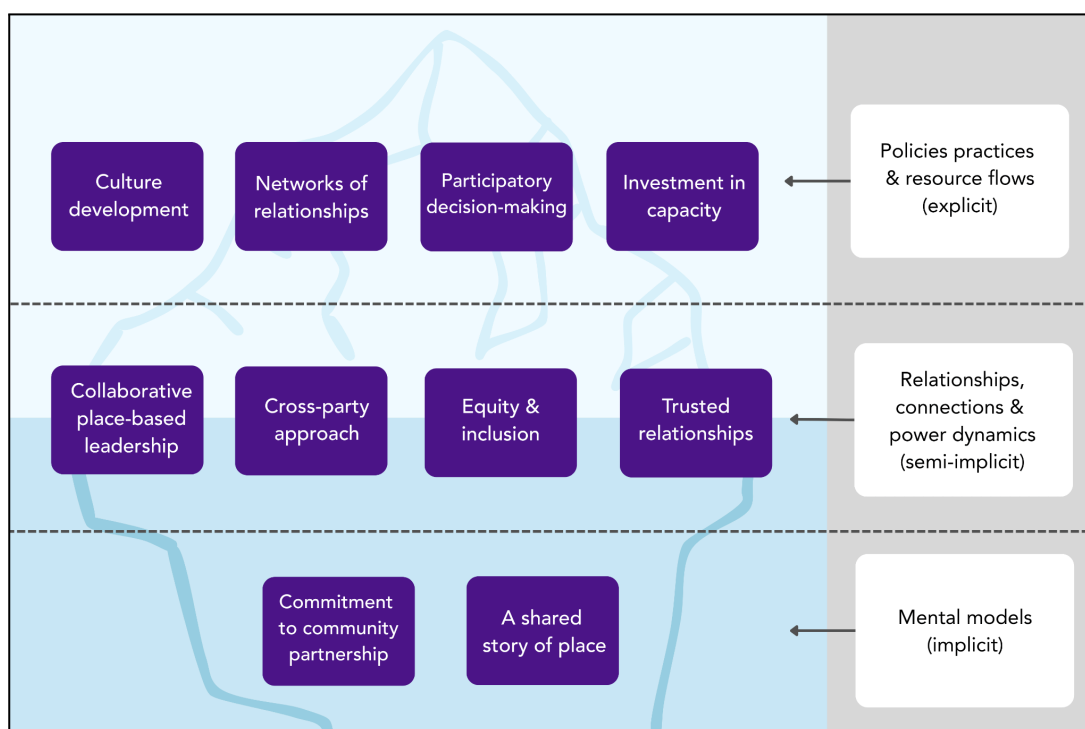
Summary

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill presents a significant opportunity to reimagine how local democracy operates at neighbourhood level. But what makes neighbourhood governance effective in practice?

Research undertaken by Collaborate CIC with Test Valley Borough Council surfaced a critical lesson, applicable to all councils: **structural reform alone will not deliver meaningful neighbourhood governance**. 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.

Ten enabling conditions for effective neighbourhood governance

We have identified ten enabling conditions that operate at multiple levels, shown in the diagram below¹. Together these conditions create the environment for neighbourhood governance to succeed.



¹This diagram is informed by Schein's iceberg model (1992) and the Water of Systems Change Framework developed by FSG. See: https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change/

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.

Realising the promise of neighbourhood governance: 5 practical steps

Effective neighbourhood governance is achievable, but it requires councils to think and act differently. All places differ and there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

We have identified five practical steps any council can take to embed the enabling conditions and plot a path to change.

