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A modest proposal for the restoration of neighbourhoods

February 2026

acknowledgements

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ResPublica is an independent, non-partisan think tank committed to renewing public policy through the values of virtue, society, and prosperity. We develop policy ideas to strengthen communities, support shared prosperity, and promote ethical public life in the service of the common good.

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introduction

For more than half a century, Britain has tried to fix its poorest neighbourhoods. Billions have been spent. Programmes have been launched, rebranded, abandoned, and revived. High streets and town centres have been rebuilt and refurbished. Yet many places remain stubbornly resistant to renewal.

The Government's, *Pride in Place strategy*, is the latest in a long line of place-based initiatives. With a recent expansion, the £5 billion programme aims to revive 'around' 380 neighbourhoods that have fallen into decline by shifting regeneration away from top-down planning toward genuinely neighbourhood-led renewal. Its three core objectives - building stronger communities, creating thriving places, and empowering residents - are familiar if still rhetorically compelling.

The history of neighbourhood regeneration offers important cautionary lessons. **Many of the communities selected for Pride of Place funding have featured in previous policies** - from programmes targeting towns, high streets, and coastal areas to earlier schemes such as Neighbourhood Renewal, the New Deal for Communities, and the Single Regeneration Budget.

There is a clear reason for this. Indices of Multiple Deprivation continue to identify the same places among the most disadvantaged, reflecting how need has become entrenched over time.[1] While deprivation in England has declined in absolute terms over the past fifty years, it has become increasingly concentrated in specific urban areas, particularly across the North and in coastal towns.[2] The gap between the most and least deprived communities continues to widen, poverty is deepening, health and income inequalities are growing.[3] This exposes an uncomfortable truth: **decades of regeneration and renewal have failed to deliver lasting change** for our poorest communities.

The question now is whether Pride in Place can succeed where so many previous programmes have fallen short, by addressing a deeper structural weakness. This paper argues that the failure of earlier place-based policies does not primarily lie in a lack of participation, partnership or community voice - important though these are - but in

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[1] The criteria for identification and allocation of Pride in Place funding includes an assessment of neighbourhoods, of circa 10,000 population, that are deemed to be 'doubly disadvantaged' by both the highest deprivation levels and the weakest social infrastructure as measured by the Community Needs Index.

[2] Norman, P., Lloyd, C., McLennan, D. *et al.* 50-year Deprivation Trajectories: Local Area Change in England and Wales, 1971–2021. *Appl. Spatial Analysis* 17, 1183–1208 (2024).

[3] Krutikova, S and Xu, X. (2026). Tackling regional inequalities: lessons from new research [Comment] Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at: https://ifs.org.uk/articles/tackling-regional-inequalities-lessons-new-research (accessed: 23 January 2026).

their inability to **give residents a genuine stake in the economic future** of their neighbourhoods.

If Pride in Place is to move beyond micro-interventions and civic management, it must embrace a more ambitious settlement - one that not only improves living standards through increased incomes, but which can increase asset wealth, by providing opportunities for **the private ownership of property**, as the foundation of neighbourhood renewal. Drawing on the distributist tradition most clearly articulated by Hilaire Belloc, this approach re-orients place-based policy around proprietary principles: expanding ownership, limiting the concentration of wealth, and embedding economic power locally.

By placing these principles at the heart of neighbourhood renewal, **civic pride can be aligned with economic strength and long-term prosperity**. Place-making is reframed not as a programme of physical or environmental improvement, but as the foundation for restoring neighbourhoods as economically functional places - capable of becoming more self-sustaining and prosperous through the wider ownership of property, land and productive assets.

the story so far…

Targeted approaches to tackling localised problems are well established in the UK. The level of place (neighbourhood, ward, town, city, region) has varied over time as have the type and nature of interventions. There are many examples of philanthropic and community-led initiatives, stretching back to the mutualism and cooperative movements of the 19th century. But it was during the post war efforts to address the deep roots of urban poverty that Area-Based Initiatives (ABIs) evolved into what would become mainstream government policy. Major programmes like the Educational Priority Areas and the Urban Programme emerged in the 1960's.[4] These aimed to tackle deprivation in inner cities by providing extra funding for projects in education, health, housing, and job creation.

Following the Inner Urban Areas Act (1978) the **focus shifted to a partnership approach** between central government, local authorities, and eventually the private sector - a model that would become a staple feature of subsequent policy. During the Thatcher and Major Governments (1979-1997) a variety of initiatives were introduced incorporating newer structures and strategies like Urban Development Corporations,[5] City Action Teams, City Challenge, Enterprise Zones and the Single Regeneration Budget. However, the New Labour Government (1997-2010) turbo-charged this approach with a myriad of initiatives including Sure Start, Education Action Zones, Health Action Zones, Employment Zones, Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders, Local Enterprise Growth Initiatives, Neighbourhood Renewal and the New Deal for Communities. As one report commented, "at any time, there can be approximately 27 different area-based initiatives operating in any one of the English regions".[6]

The focus of early interventions was clearly on the UK's largest cities and their most deprived communities, which had been the subject of numerous white papers and studies.[7] Their **purpose was to address the underlying causes of deindustrialisation and the resulting impact of structural unemployment**. The quality and affordability of housing, along with the physical environment, was also a fundamental component of many place-based policies, generally considered essential

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[4] Lankelly Chase. A historical review of place-based approaches, 2017.

[5] Development Corporations have remained on the statute books and are now a favoured vehicle for Metro-Mayors – [https://www.wardhadaway.com/insights/updates/why-are-mayoral-development-corporations-now-the-favoured-regeneration-vehicles-of-englands-metro-mayors/]

[6] Colomb, C. (2007). Unpacking new labour's 'Urban Renaissance' agenda: Towards a socially sustainable reurbanisation of British cities? Planning Practice & Research, 22(1), 1–24. [https://doi.org/10.1080/02697450701455249]

[7] The Inner Urban Areas Bill/White Paper (1978), Faith in the City (1985) commissioned by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Streamlining the Cities (1986) and the Action for Cities programme (1988) all contributed to a refocussing of policy and funding on cities and their most deprived communities.

for effective and sustainable community regeneration. The move towards partnership and multi-agency working, to bring about wider, **joined-up system change gradually emerged over time, alongside attempts to involve local communities in decision-making**. With the arrival of regional (Regional Development Agencies) and then sub-regional government (Combined Authorities) place-based policies became distinct from, although still a key part of, broader economic development and physical regeneration.[8]

large-scale economic development

For some commentators' urban regeneration, particularly in our largest cities, has been an undeniable success. The **docklands** in London, Liverpool, and Salford, or **city centre regeneration** in Manchester, Birmingham, and other core cities have improved the built environment, revitalised former industrial buildings and attracted private investment. The physical changes in these places are obvious, marking an urban renaissance characterised by **a resurgence in city living** and an influx of young professionals – the so called 'Richard Florida effect' – with economic growth driven by the clustering of creative talent and knowledge workers.[9] The legacy of successive urban policies means inner cities are no longer regarded as intractable problems but viewed as positive drivers of growth.

Major sporting events like the London 2012 Olympics and the Manchester 2002 Commonwealth Games have also provided a catalyst for regenerating communities, primarily through accelerating housing and infrastructure improvements. These have also been hailed as resounding success stories. New businesses have located here bringing jobs and growth. People have chosen to live here. Adjacent communities have also been transformed by investments in new homes, schools, shops and amenities, fostering civic pride. **However, the outcomes have been mixed, illustrating how these programmes are not a panacea.** Despite decades of regeneration efforts, East Manchester and Stratford in East London continue to experience high unemployment and persistent poverty.

None of these models were particularly interested in engaging with or involving the affected communities. Nobody asked residents on the Isle of Dogs if they should build Canary Wharf. And it remains unclear how this type of regeneration has actively improved opportunities for people living locally. Some of the most deprived wards in London exist cheek by jowl with the most extreme wealth of the city's financial centres – the proverbial tale of two cities.

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[8] The Sub-National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration (2007) proposed a unified framework with RDAs responsible for strategic regional growth, and Local Authorities taking the lead on area-based initiatives.
[9] Florida, R. The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life. Basic Books, 2002.

The downsides of property-based regeneration include increased inequality and gentrification as lower-income residents have been displaced and priced out of their neighbourhoods by rising rents. This is especially true for inner London where there are relatively few places that have not been gentrified over the past 30 years. No more so than the areas around the 'city fringe' such as Spitalfields, Shoreditch, and Old Street where small pockets of social housing and older working-class communities still exist, albeit now less visible among the growing number of hipsters and the professional salariat who can afford to live there.

This problem goes to the heart of regeneration and renewal. Success in "regenerating communities" is largely dependent on the primary beneficiaries. **The benefits do not always extend equally to the pre-existing local populations.**

If the purpose of area-based initiatives is to address market failure, reverse decline, and increase economic activity, how can this be achieved without changing the essential character of a place, without attracting different, wealthier people into the area? Can such initiatives help struggling neighbourhoods to thrive and prosper by creating genuinely social and economically mixed communities? The record of past programmes, judging by their evaluations, is hardly inspiring.

area-based initiatives

The Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), which was launched in 1994 and operated until 2002, was an attempt to simplify previous funding streams into a single pot. Spanning two Governments, this was one of the largest area-based initiatives to date. The objective was to stimulate failing local economies by supporting business and creating jobs as well as upgrading the physical environment by leveraging private investment. However, the programme delivered mixed results. Henry Overman's analysis of 165 SRB-supported projects (with combined public, EU, and private funding of £8.2 billion) found it had no significant impact on employment rates.[10] While successful in delivering localised, physical improvements and 'creating' or more often 'importing' jobs from elsewhere, it **struggled to translate these economic gains into improved employment for the local population**.

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[10] Gibbons, Stephen & Overman, Henry & Sarvimäki, Matti, 2021. "The local economic impacts of regeneration projects: Evidence from UK's single regeneration budget," Journal of Urban Economics, Elsevier, vol. 122(C).

The New Labour Government's **National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal** (2001) signalled a departure in several ways. It implicitly recognised that opportunity and need were closely linked concepts that policy must seek to address. The strategy ended the perverse culture of competitive bidding and shifted focus from physical infrastructure and job creation to more holistic and people-centred interventions that sought to tackle social exclusion and structural inequality through joined-up public services. The objective was to close the gap between the poorest neighbourhoods and the rest of the country across key social outcomes (education, health, employment, crime, housing). The strategy did not lack ambition, with the goal that "within 10 to 20 years no one should be seriously disadvantaged by where they live."

The **New Deal for Communities**, announced earlier in 1998, formed a central pillar of the National Strategy and a flagship policy for area-based initiatives. The most intensive and locally targeted strand of the wider strategy gave each of the 39 selected neighbourhoods around £50 million over 10 years and placed residents at the centre of a community-led process. (With a population of about 10,000 this represented about £5,000 per resident).

Again, the evaluation findings for both NDCs[11] and the wider NSNR[12] were variable. The most positive impacts were felt in terms of reduced crime, cleaner streets and stronger local partnerships but evidence for deeper social and economic improvements were modest. There was **little measurable change in skills, employment and income.** The national evaluation did find that residents in NDC areas had a greater chance of transitioning off incapacity benefits compared with control areas. Yet overall **impacts on health were weak and improvements to housing marginal**.

Between 1998 and 2010 the NDC programme achieved some visible improvements, and the evaluation reported good value for money, although some evidence suggests that higher spending did not always guarantee better outcomes. **Results varied widely between areas,** with some notable disasters – see Kensington, Liverpool. Overall, the NDC experiment showed that intensive, community-led regeneration can make a difference locally — but its **impact was uneven and often short-lived** without continued public funding and long-term systemic support.

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[11] Batty, E., Beatty, C., Foden, M., Lawless, P., Pearson, S. and Wilson, I. (2010) The New Deal for Communities Experience: A final assessment. Technical Report. Department for Communities and Local Government.
[https://extra.shu.ac.uk/ndc/downloads/general/A%20final%20assessment.pdf]
[12] Department for Communities and Local Government. (2010). *Evaluation of the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal: Final report* [https://extra.shu.ac.uk/ndc/downloads/general/Neighbourhood%20Renewal%20Final%20report.pdf].

The Case of Kensington NDC

Kensington is a district east of Liverpool's city centre. It is primarily residential with most of the housing stock consisting of terraced houses. In the decades prior to its New Deal status the area had fallen into rapid decline. Unemployment was a city-wide problem but the effects of poor local amenities, boarded shops, failing schools, and housing policies that had started to undermine the fabric of the local community, exacerbated social and economic problems in Kensington.

Social landlords replaced ageing households with younger, 'problem' families. Anti-social behaviour, crime, and drug related issues gradually increased as tipping points were reached. Homeowners started to move out and buy to rent landlords moved in. Situated near the university, the area became a prime location for student accommodation and houses of multiple occupation. Gradually private landlords used homes previously occupied by students to house asylum seekers and refugees. In a relatively short period of time the character of this solid, predominantly white working-class community, had changed beyond recognition.

So, what did the £60 million NDC programme achieve? Look on Google earth and you will see the scarring effects of schools, businesses, shops, pubs, and housing razed to the ground. Physically and environmentally, the area has only worsened. But it is the social and economic indicators that are most damning. By every measure Kensington performs below national and city averages. Home ownership, which was 40% before the NDC programme, is now just 25% - the reverse of gentrification. The unemployed claimant rate is at 10%, Universal Credit is 26%. Child poverty is over 40% with 88% of all pupils on Free School Meals, while life expectancy is 73 years – that's 17 years less than the areas with the highest life expectancy in England. It would be hard to imagine a worse outcome.

Explanations for what went wrong are numerous. They include mistrust between key stakeholders—most notably between the local authority and the NDC partnership—limited and uneven community involvement, an over-reliance on agency-led strategies, weak succession planning, shifts in national policy, and adverse external economic conditions. Claims that the community itself lacked the capacity to engage are unconvincing. Between 1994 and 2000, Kensington benefited from substantial European funding to support a large-scale community development programme. While many of these factors undoubtedly contributed to the outcome, none fully explain the sheer scale of the failure.[13] Today, the Kensington and Fairfield ward is once again the focus of policy intervention, having been designated a Pride in Place area.

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[13] See Kensington NDC Evaluation and 'Who Killed Kenny' by John P. Houghton, Newstart Magazine, 2017.

The New Labour Government did not immediately tighten public spending in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. The fiscal stimulus to counter recession and to bail out the banks saw expenditure rise to historic levels. But it was already clear that future consolidation would be necessary.

In this moment **Total Place** (2009-2010) emerged as a new policy response. It intended to find efficiency savings by taking an area-based, rather than departmental, view of all public spending. The aim was whole-system reform of fragmented public services, redesigned around the citizen, to improve outcomes by focusing on early intervention and prevention. The approach was piloted across 13 locations in England. **The evidence from its brief implementation suggests that prevention would be neither quick nor simple.** In Birmingham, the biggest of the pilots, public agencies spent 93% on out-of-work benefits, and only 7% on helping people to get into work. In the domain of health and wellbeing, an even greater proportion of 96% was spent on treating the symptoms of illness, and a miniscule 4% on prevention.[14]

Unfortunately, this short lived but influential policy was discontinued following the 2010 election of the UK Coalition Government, although it would influence their introduction of the albeit limited 'Whole Place Community Budgets' experiment. **Austerity was to define this subsequent period**. Sure Start, widely regarded as one of the most successful area-based initiatives in the UK was slowly wound down. All major regeneration and renewal budgets were cut. Regional Development Agencies and Regional Government Offices, which had led on policy and funding were abolished. Urban policy was still an important feature of the Government's programme, but the emphasis shifted from regions to cities with the eventual introduction of 'City Deals'.

Localism remained central to the Coalition's agenda. This was framed as a shift from "top-down" government to a **"Big Society"** approach. **Empowering local people became synonymous with reducing bureaucracy** while transferring responsibility for services and assets to communities. The Localism Act 2011 was the legislative cornerstone, intended to establish a new relationship between citizens and the state. Neighbourhood planning, community asset transfer, and the Community Right to Build gave local groups tools to shape their environment. Yet in practice, these mechanisms were rarely taken up, especially in the most deprived communities where resources and skills were scarce.

Wider policies like the Big Society Bank for social impact investments, and the Community Organisers Programme designed to train residents and strengthen local networks, have managed to be sustained albeit restructured, rehomed and rebranded. While the National Citizen Service introduced as a youth volunteering programme, was only recently abolished by the new Labour Government. Although some aspects

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[14] Birmingham City Council (2010. *Birmingham Total Place Pilot: Final Report*. www.leadershipcentre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/TP_Birmingham_Final_Report_version_2.pdf

of this agenda did work, to a limited degree, it is reasonable to conclude that **none of these interventions had the desired transformational effects**.

The Troubled Families programme was another key policy designed to help families with multiple, complex problems. It aimed to build family resilience and reduce costs to the state. Operated through local authorities this was in practice an area-based initiative, with most families concentrated in specific geographical locations. Again, the success of this initiative is disputed. The programme achieved some short-term improvements in shifting delivery of services to early intervention but ultimately it was unable to solve truly deep-seated family issues.[15]

When the **Levelling Up** agenda emerged under Boris Johnson's Government after 2019, it borrowed heavily from the localism narrative but sought to re-inject capital funding and national strategy. The rhetoric shifted from civic empowerment to spatial rebalancing — from "people power" to "place prosperity." Through the Levelling Up Fund (£4.8bn), Town Fund (£3.6bn) and High Street Funds (£830m), the Government invested billions into local infrastructure, transport and regeneration. Yet critics noted that while money was flowing again, **the policy lacked the participatory ethos of localism**: decisions were often centralised in Whitehall, competitive bidding processes were reintroduced to identify spade-ready projects, and communities were largely consulted after, rather than before projects were designed.

In 2024 the Public Accounts Committee revealed that just 10% of these funds had been spent. While it is expected that capital projects will take time to deliver results, the committee identified that much of the money, about 65%, was still unallocated.[16] **Short lived and never fully realised, Levelling Up provides an abject lesson in how not to do things.**

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[15] National evaluation of the Troubled Families Programme 2015-2020: Findings, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, March 2019
[16] House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts Levelling up funding to local government Twenty-First Report of Session 2023–24, March 2024

so, what have we learnt?

In launching Pride in Place, the Government stated that, "we have listened to the feedback of local stakeholders and applied the learnings from the New Deal for Communities". Understanding *why* policies fail is relatively straightforward; identifying what genuinely works, and why, is far more difficult.

The Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (ICON) has clearly set out the challenges facing the UK's most disadvantaged communities, and highlighted examples of effective practice from past interventions.[17] None have been more successful than Sure Start, which as long-term evaluations of this early years programme proved, was cost effective in delivering lasting health and education benefits for disadvantaged children.[18] Yet as ICON has stressed, revitalising disadvantaged areas through a combination of physical investment, community empowerment, and joined-up public service delivery remains inherently complex.

Neighbourhood renewal is a process, not an event. It requires time, continuity, and long-term commitment. There is no clear endpoint to renewal, and no single intervention that can deliver transformation on its own. The evidence suggests that a range of practices and policies can work in particular contexts, sometimes simultaneously. However, **there is no one-size-fits-all model**. The solutions must be localised and bespoke in overcoming challenges and resolving creative tensions.

top-down versus bottom-up strategy

Evaluations consistently show that place-based renewal works best where there is **strong leadership combined with the capacity of local communities to engage, co-create, and ultimately own the process**. However, the evidence is less clear on how such capacity can be developed in places where governance is dysfunctional, institutions are ineffective, or communities lack the resources to organise from the ground up.

There are well-documented examples of bottom-up initiatives leading to lasting social and economic change, including Lightmoor Village, Coin Street Community Builders, and the Eldonian Urban Village. Yet these grassroots movements have rarely been a defining feature of traditional, centrally designed programmes. Place-based renewal takes time—to understand local conditions, build relationships and implement plans. For this reason, Government has begun supporting residents through mechanisms

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[17] No Short Cuts: Towards a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Recovery, Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods, 2026

[18] P, Carneiro and S, Cattan and N, Ridpath. (2024). *The short- and medium-term impacts of Sure Start on educational outcomes*. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at https://ifs.org.uk/publications/short-and-medium-term-impacts-sure-start-educational-outcomes (accessed: 28 January 2026).

such as the Community Wealth Fund, aimed at building capacity and fostering partnerships.

Crucially, capacity must be built on both sides, both top-down and bottom up. Barriers to change are often found not within communities, but within public sector bodies resistant to innovation or uncertain how to work with civic institutions.

large programmes versus small projects

The evidence strongly suggests that **holistic programmes are more effective than isolated projects** in delivering whole-system change. Where they succeed, they generate economic, social and environmental benefits, particularly when communities are actively involved in co-design. A **shared, integrated vision**, combined with clarity about sequencing and purpose, helps ensure that individual projects respond to genuine local needs while avoiding unintended consequences such as displacement.

At the same time, attempts to align multiple policy domains and mainstream public services around local priorities can prove overly ambitious. In some contexts, **starting with a smaller number of high-leverage interventions** may generate stronger and more durable outcomes, building confidence and momentum over time. Pride in Place appears to adopt this logic, prioritising visible improvements and community-led actions rather than attempting system-wide transformation from the outset. **Scale, therefore, should be understood dynamically**—with renewal expanding from micro-interventions to larger, integrated programmes over time.

longer and shorter-term commitments

A persistent weakness in regeneration policy has been the difficulty of sustaining long-term commitment. Pride in Place is framed as a ten-year strategy, yet no government can guarantee continuity beyond a single parliamentary term. This is a systemic failure, where **discontinuity runs through different government policies like a fault line.**

There is, however, an opportunity for **Mayors and Strategic Authorities**—with increasing autonomy and powers over development corporations and devolved funding—to take greater ownership of renewal.[19] Working with local authorities they could develop **hyper-local solutions within a broader understanding of 'Total Place'**.[20] By untethering the local state from the dictates of central government it may be possible for places to put an end to stop-start policies to correct short-lived or

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[19] Devolution and urban regeneration How can metro mayors transform England's towns and cities? Institute for Government, 2024

[20] The case for Total Place 2.0, Institute for Government. May 2025 [https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-05/Total_Place_2_0.pdf]

uneven benefits, influence the delivery of mainstream public services, and maintain consistent support over time.

levels of decision making

Effective renewal requires action at multiple spatial and institutional levels, linking neighbourhood-scale interventions to wider economic and policy systems. **Clear roles, coordination mechanisms and accountability arrangements** are essential. While co-locating policy functions within a single tier of government can help, coordination does not always require institutional consolidation. What matters most is **clarity of responsibility and effective collaboration**, including between neighbouring areas where the impacts of policy extend beyond administrative boundaries.

social versus economic

Regeneration has long been shaped by **tensions between physical, economic, and social objectives**, as well as between investment in **hard and soft infrastructure**. Physical regeneration delivers visible change quickly, but too often fails to improve life chances for existing residents. Economic strategies aimed at attracting investment or raising land values can conflict with social goals where they accelerate displacement rather than inclusion.

Social infrastructure—local organisations, skills, networks, and leadership—delivers slower and less tangible returns yet remains critical to long-term success. **Effective renewal requires holding these tensions in balance**: aligning physical investment with economic participation and embedding hard infrastructure within a sustained commitment to social capacity and shared prosperity.

Community engagement brings clear benefits. It improves legitimacy, identifies priorities, and enhances service design. Engagement strengthens trust, cohesion, and social capital. However, UK evidence shows limited causal impact on economic prosperity when engagement is treated in isolation. Evaluations struggle to separate engagement from other inputs, and the evidence consistently suggests that **engagement matters—but without economic power, it rarely shifts outcomes**.

This points to a missing piece in renewal policy: **aligning engagement with asset ownership and wealth generation**. Renewal must focus more directly on employment, skills, enterprise, and the **wider distribution of private ownership—** homes and businesses rooted in place. If disadvantaged communities are to become prosperous and self-sustaining, residents must gain a direct stake in their economic future. Asset ownership reduces dependency on public spending and creates the conditions for reinvestment in services.

Gentrification or renewal

There is a long-standing tension between the aims of neighbourhood renewal and the risks of displacement and gentrification. It is to be noted that many of the places targeted by Pride in Place, and previous policies, were never truly affluent in the first place. This raises a deeper question about whether 'renewal' or 'restoration' is an accurate metaphor for the process of transformation. This is more than a semantic distinction. Some places have always cycled poverty (e.g. East London) and that in part has been their purpose. But many if not most neighbourhoods targeted by area-based initiatives were, at one time, functional if not exactly prosperous. They provided safe places for families to live, served by local amenities. But what we are now dealing with across the UK is **the normalisation of wholesale decline**. Stark spatial inequalities that have turned places where working class families once lived happily, into miserable, run-down, no-go zones.

Achieving more socially and economically balanced communities should be at the heart of sustainable renewal - improving a place while attracting newer, wealthier households into the community. Gentrification should not be used as a stick to beat regeneration. Clearly, projects that reduce affordability or displace lower-income residents must be challenged. **Housing—particularly affordable homes to buy and rent—must sit at the centre of renewal**, given its centrality to living standards and the cost of living.

demonstrating impact

The evidence for area-based initiatives is a persistent weakness. There has been considerable evaluation but much of this has been focussed on process and not on longer term impact.[21] Much can be learnt but the challenges of demonstrating impact often require a leap of faith. Too few schemes measured long-term outcomes or learned systematically from experience. Most begin with a policy intention and a degree of internal logic to programme design, utilising standard methodologies like project cycle management or theory of change. But too often the activities that follow are less a coherent toolkit for solving problems, and more a bag of ill-fitting spanners. Formative evaluations, that allow for real-time design, test and learn have been largely absent. Robust evaluation and the development of action learning networks can accelerate the transfer of good practice at pace and scale.

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[21] Lawless, P. The New Deal for Communities programme in England: is area based urban regeneration possible? Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University, 2007. [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_45376_smxx.pdf]

a new communitarianism?

Pride in Place continues a long tradition of place-based policy shaped by successive strands of communitarian thinking. But does it mark a genuine departure—reframing how power, responsibility, and belonging are understood at neighbourhood level?

new labour and the 'third way'

Unlike the policies that preceded it, **New Labour's Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy was explicitly grounded in a communitarian philosophy**, drawing on a diverse range of thinkers including Amitai Etzioni, Alasdair MacIntyre, and John MacMurray—the Scottish philosopher who influenced Tony Blair. While the precise form of communitarianism which this policy ultimately followed is debated,[22] its implementation was most clearly Fabian in its top-down, state-led approach to shaping local outcomes. The concept of **"community" was a persistent theme in New Labour's rhetoric, serving as a normative logic for urban regeneration and governance**. It emphasised social independence, common values, balancing rights with the responsibilities of citizens to participate in their local communities and regeneration activities through community self-help and local partnerships. In this sense the policy had absorbed much from the various forms of community development that occurred during the 60s, 70s and 80s.

At its core was the wider ideology of **the "Third Way" which sought a middle ground between state socialism and free-market capitalism**.[23] Key tenets included embracing wealth creation through free markets while using that wealth for social good, promoting individual responsibility alongside social rights, and focusing on "modernised social democracy" that was both innovative and socially progressive. In essence, New Labour combined neo-liberal economics with social liberalism, using the "neighbourhood" as a key site for realising this vision. The strategy aimed to foster a sense of belonging and civic engagement, while encouraging individuals to take responsibility for improving their own lives and localities.

Yet, despite the creation of new governance structures such as Local Strategic Partnerships and Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders, the strategy remained highly centralised and bureaucratic. Onerous reporting of data against a myriad of indicators from local to central government reinforced vertical accountability. The traditions of community development run deep in the Labour party,[24] however, the rhetoric of 'devolution' - and even 'double devolution' - ultimately rang hollow.

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[22] Driver, S., & Martell, L. (1997). New Labour's Communitarianisms. *Critical Social Policy*, 17(3), 17–37.

[23] Giddens, A. (1998). The third way: The renewal of social democracy. Polity Press.

[24] Tinline. P (2025). Not just the Big Society: community politics and the labour movement. An essay for the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods

National government retained a centralising instinct, hesitant to relinquish real authority or control. **The result was a model that spoke the language of local empowerment while keeping decision-making firmly in Whitehall's grip.**

big society, small state

The Big Society which emerged under David Cameron's coalition Government drew on a different blend of conservative communitarianism, Burkean civic philosophy, and Catholic social thought. Its core principles - subsidiarity, solidarity, and the common good - reflected **a belief that social flourishing begins not with the state, but with the "little platoons" of society**: small, self-organising civil institutions (families, faith groups, local associations, charities) which are the foundation of social order. This was presented as an alternative both to Labour's centralised statism and to the market individualism of Thatcherism. While affirming that there was such a thing as society, the argument was that Britain had become overly dependent on state bureaucracy, leaving civic institutions hollowed out.

The project positioned itself as a moral re-centring of conservatism, promising to level power downward - from Whitehall to neighbourhoods, citizens, cooperatives and social enterprises. In practice, the anticipated surge in civic participation—volunteering, mutualism, community ownership—failed to materialise at scale. Its most tangible legacy, however, was the acceleration of genuine place-based devolution. There is a certain irony in the fact that this shift took a largely municipal form at precisely the moment when austerity was eroding the financial foundations of local government. The Big Society served multiple political purposes, reframing a smaller state not merely as spending cuts but as empowerment. Communities were to solve what the market and state could not. Yet too often**, community organisations became delivery agents for shrinking budgets** rather than autonomous institutions with real economic power.

levelling up, managing down

Following years of political turbulence and internal Conservative conflict, Levelling Up emerged as the flagship post-Brexit agenda. Unlike its predecessors, it was not rooted in a moral theory of community or a social-democratic programme of structural reform. It was primarily political, designed to consolidate electoral support in the new conservative constituencies following the 2019 general election victory. These so called "left behind" areas, former industrial and coastal towns in the North and Midlands (often referred to as the "Red Wall"), were traditionally working-class Labour strongholds, with significant deprivation, that had voted strongly to leave the EU in the 2016 referendum.

The Levelling Up White Paper (2022) was analytically rich, drawing heavily on the international evidence, and the work of leading academics in economic geography including Philip McCann, and Andrés Rodríguez-Pose et al, who identified the UK as

having one of the highest levels of spatial inequality in the developed world.[25] The policy was framed around addressing regional disparities. Its twelve "missions" sought to translate this diagnosis into long-term social and economic goals. Yet the underlying political philosophy remained thin.

It did not articulate a coherent framework for the relationship between state, market and community, nor a clear theory of change for reversing deep structural inequalities. Instead, it functioned as an expansive political narrative, capable of accommodating a wide array of initiatives—capital grants, ad hoc funding pots, town-centre schemes, research clusters and investment zones. This eclecticism made the agenda flexible and rhetorically powerful, but also diffuse and vulnerable to fragmentation, short-termism, and shifting ministerial priorities. Despite gestures towards devolution, control over funding, criteria, and direction remained firmly centralised.

back to the future?

So, what are the philosophical or ideological underpinnings of Pride of Place? Is it a genuine departure, or simply a repackaging of familiar ideas, animated by the hope that better delivery or greater managerial competence will succeed where others failed? **At first glance, Pride in Place appears, very much like 'Levelling-up', as a technocratic, transactional grant-giving programme, focused on visible improvements**. The maintenance of public space is a good organising principle for urban regeneration,[26] although a cynic might view this approach as a political manoeuvre which emphasises public order and civility by addressing relatively low hanging fruit to make the public realm a visible competency— to show that government can *"fix what's broken"*.

Yet, beneath its utilitarian language lies a half-expressed belief that place - as lived, emotional, social territory - is not incidental to public life, but foundational to personal identity, community belonging and social dignity. Rather than treating neighbourhoods as zones of deficit to be "fixed" from the outside, Pride in Place tentatively reframes them as civic ecosystems where people's attachments, trust, and agency directly shape economic and social outcomes.

In this respect the ethos is the continuation of the 'Big Society'. Pride in Place implicitly acknowledges that places are not just geographical units and human beings are not simply labour market widgets. They inhabit streets, shops, parks, schools, rituals, and form small solidarities. When environments deteriorate - with empty shops, vandalism, and a degraded public realm - people experience demoralisation and civic detachment.

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[25] McCann, P. (2016). The UK Regional-National Economic Problem: Geography, globalisation and governance (1st ed.). Routledge

[26] Shaw, J. A politics of the public realm, Why don't politicians care about the public realm, and what can be done to fix it? Notes on Local Government, January 2026 [https://jackshaw.substack.com/p/a-politics-of-the-public-realm]

Improving physical environments is not cosmetic; it is a condition for hope, aspiration and psychological well-being. This has echoes of Mary Douglas, Jane Jacobs, and modern place-based urbanism: disorder feeds alienation; beauty, legibility, and neighbourliness reinforce belonging.

A notable departure from Labour's earlier policies is the quiet recognition of aesthetics. Poor places are not only deprived; they are often ugly, fragmented, and architecturally incoherent. Pride in Place quietly internalises a neighbourhood design ethic akin to what the think tank, Create Streets, have been calling for: the tangible effects of good design - breathability, gardens, trees, attractive public space and human scale – so that our buildings and streets can be "as good as we can afford — not as cheap as we can bear". As a policy Pride in Place falls shy of using the word 'beauty'. But it shouldn't. Beauty is not elitist - it is a public good.

Where the policy falls on more familiar ground is with its governance. Pride of Place introduces the binary process of establishing Neighbourhood Boards to **engage local citizens in decision-making while simultaneously by-passing devolved authorities** with a centrally managed programme.

a modest proposal

There is an enduring romanticism on both the left and right of British politics, that often idealises community. All communities are somehow unique with their own sense of 'identity' that must be preserved and protected. The idea of renewal, restoration or recovery is inherently nostalgic, implying a return to something that was once better than it is now.[27] A 'golden age' that has been lost to globalisation, immigration, and social liberalism or a site of mutual aid, solidarity, and resistance against market forces. Yet the idea of a 'knowable community' that is rooted in the past, in direct relationships, shared identity, and common practices is a central theme across all parties.

The Marxist communitarian Raymond Williams saw community not as a static, or inherently idyllic concept, but as a dynamic process of "common culture" built through relationships, experiences, and social struggle. Community is something experienced locally, but which was also capable of being extended through media, as an ongoing, often contested process of constant cultural reproduction. But much has changed since the urban policies of the early post-war period. Society, and the media through which we communicate, has transformed, simultaneously enabling greater connectivity and more diverse forms of community, while fragmenting shared relationships and increasing social isolation.

Clearly places and neighbourhoods still exist. But the extent to which people know their neighbours has changed. Society has individuated to such a degree that some groups of people are as likely to identify with communities of interest - with abstract identities and virtual relationships - as they are with physical places. People are more mobile and more likely to live in a different place to the one they grew up in. Those most likely to identify with place are the ones who have been 'left behind', where a lack of opportunity or social capital has locked communities into place and does not bridge them to anywhere different, as David Goodhart might put it.[28]

where it has all failed ….

Various governments have increasingly focussed on active participation, empowerment and local decision-making with varied and limited success. However, where **place-based policy has manifestly failed is in its attempts to give deprived communities a real stake in their own economic future**, to share in prosperity.

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[27] Gaston, S; Hilhorst, S. At Home in One's Past: Nostalgia as a Cultural and Political Force in Britain, France and Germany. Demos, 2018.

[28] Goodhart, D. (2017). The road to somewhere: The populist revolt and the future of politics. Hurst & Company.

What would have happened in Kensington NDC if the government had 'helicoptered' £50 million and given every member of that community five thousand pounds? Twenty thousand pounds for a family of four would have been more than the average annual UK salary in 1998. The amount could have been potentially life changing for the 10,000 people who lived there. Who knows what they would have done. Many would have no doubt 'wasted' the money on short term consumption, although spending in the local economy would have stimulated aggregate demand. Others may have used the money to buy their way out of the area. The thought is fanciful given how far-removed mainstream policy is from radical experiments such as 'People's Quantitative Easing'[29] or 'Universal Basic Income'.

The "Pride in Place" programme is focused on improving neighbourhoods at a very local level, with single points of intervention, simpler funding routes, and stronger roles for residents and community groups to deliver visible, tangible improvements that rebuild trust. Fixing broken windows, taking charge of local eyesores, transferring assets to the community, preserving the local pub are all important. And there is evidence that fixing little problems can prevent bigger problems occurring. By tackling everyday disorder - litter, vandalism, graffiti, and anti-social behaviour - governments can restore confidence, strengthen civic pride and deter more serious problems from taking root.

But **if Pride in Place is to succeed** where other programmes have failed and genuinely restore our failing neighbourhoods, **it must move beyond the micro-interventions** of a mission-free technocracy **to consider the means of distributing wealth among our poorest communities.**

distributism not redistribution

Labour is traditionally associated with policies aimed at income redistribution, although the current Government – keen to reduce inequality through economic growth and targeted taxation, rather than a radical overhaul of wealth - has taken a relatively modest approach compared to previous Labour governments. But the key mechanisms for redistribution are still limited to tax and benefit transfers, aligned with increased spending on public services to achieve more equitable outcomes for lower income groups. Place-based programmes form part of the policy mix in attempting to level the playing field.

Meanwhile the UK continues to struggle with a long running housing crisis characterised by a massive shortfall of homes and a growing affordability gap that has intensified over the past two decades, reducing social mobility.[30] Housing costs make up the largest share of household expenditure. In the UK, nearly three in ten (28%)

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[29] Coppola, F. (2019). *The case for people's quantitative easing.* Medford, MA: Polity
[30] Levell, P. (2026). How the 1990s and 2000s property price boom reduced social mobility [Comment] Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at: https://ifs.org.uk/articles/how-1990s-and-2000s-property-price-boom-reduced-social-mobility (accessed: 27 January 2026).

people on the lowest incomes spend more than a third of their income on housing, largely in private rented accommodation. This compares with just 2% in the top income quintile who face similarly high relative housing costs.[31]

Yet, **despite the emphasis which area-based initiatives have placed on housing, none have attempted, let alone succeeded in widening the ownership of private property**. In places where practically everything is rented – housing, information, communication, entertainment – creating a 'proprietary economy' where people possess a real stake in the places they live in should be a central aim. Instead of building the capacity of communities to engage in bureaucratic processes, to transfer community assets, block speculative development, or inform community plans, might not energy and resources be better directed to increasing the capability of residents to build homes through community land trusts, cooperative housing schemes, and shared ownership models? Unfortunately, **Pride of Place has relatively little to say about housing,** and nothing about the role community development could play in meeting new housing targets.

After years of focusing on redistributive economics and social investment, **is it not time to take a different 'distributist' approach** - to widely disperse the ownership of property including homes and small businesses, using the corrective power of the state and cooperative credit? Such a project should not be confused with Margaret Thatcher's vision for home ownership which intended to create a "property-owning democracy" but ultimately contributed to the current housing crisis, leaving a legacy of private 'buy to let' landlords, a shortfall in new social housing, and reduced affordability for later generations.

Lessons can be learnt so that such unintended consequences are not repeated. There are existing legal mechanisms to protect the resale of 'right to buy' properties to private landlords. However, **the fundamental idea outlined here is not about transferring what remains of a limited social housing stock** but how communities can create new properties. Restoring neighbourhoods requires a significant shift, to treat property not as a luxury, or an asset from which to extract maximum value, but as a basic foundation of freedom: the means by which people gain control over their lives, dignity in their work and pride in the place where they live. As Belloc argued, in contrasting socialism with capitalism:

"*There is a third form of society, and it is the only one in which sufficiency and security can be combined with freedom, and that form is a society in which property is well distributed...*".[32]

This quiet revolution of widespread proprietorship – with **many small owners rather than a few large ones** - would help foster self-reliance, protect citizens from unfettered markets and limit dependency on concentrated state power. Seen in this light, regeneration and renewal strategies could better align with hyper-local distributist principles. Of course, achieving such an ambition would be a complicated,

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[31] https://www.health.org.uk/evidence-hub/housing/inequalities-in-housing-affordability
[32] Belloc, Hilaire. An Essay on the Restoration of Property. IHS Press, 2002.

arduous and lengthy endeavour; but no more so than the efforts to date which have merely extended existing conditions and so far, failed to transform society.

After decades of local area interventions, it is still optimistic to think that the culture of 'partnership working' is sufficiently mature to accommodate the proposal outlined here. Yet the institutional architecture is in place and does not need reinventing. Such a project must proceed from a devolved local state – from strategic and local authorities, social landlords, building societies and investors working together to a shared plan.

Neighbourhood boards should have oversight of planning and implementation, reporting into local and strategic authorities. Neighbourhood plans should be situated within strategic spatial plans and jointly owned by all partners. They should outline the opportunities for community led housing schemes identifying vacant properties, and under-utilised land that can be purchased or transferred for the purpose of building new homes (and businesses) for rent and ultimately private ownership.

The **development of neighbourhood boards as non-profit organisations**, incorporated as development trusts or growth companies, could ultimately generate sources of income through community land trusts and rental income to re-invest in communities and help places become financially self-sustaining.

Housing investment is critical and funding should be pooled and ring-fenced at the hyper-local level. **Homes England should be devolved to Strategic Authorities** and funding allocated to neighbourhood plans. **Institutional investors**, private pension funds like LG and Aviva, should be encouraged and incentivised to take forward smaller scale housing developments in multiple priority areas, in addition to the simpler large-scale developments that can guarantee high value returns.

Building Societies, like Nationwide, should be invited to join partnerships to **reinvent the non-profit motive for building homes** and to scale up learning from their Oakfield Housing Development pilot programme in Swindon. The creation of new mutuals and friendly societies should be encouraged and supported. Learning should be exchanged and transferred from successful **Community Land Trusts** across the country. Local authorities should be encouraged to use municipal bonds to finance housing and infrastructure. This is a programme of activity that can be delivered in partnership from the top down, and bottom up, to achieve a localist vision for renewal.

With lessons learnt from the experience of Private Finance Initiatives, **whole area Public Private Finance schemes** could be designed to help build the wider infrastructure requirements (housing, schools, health centres and hospitals) that enable communities to function and prosper. And all of this could be nested within a rigorous understanding of Total Place - to map all public spending and tax revenues at the local level with the objective of narrowing the fiscal gap and making all places fiscally balanced – the ultimate measure of sustainable impact.

All this combined in a single area-based approach to physical investment and community wealth would constitute **a 'new institutional imperative' for investing in localities**.[33]

In moving towards this vision, the aim is to **avoid residential silos**. The longer-term challenge must be to evolve a better spatial approach to future housing development and place-making. There is plenty of evidence within the UK about how housing markets are driving outcomes, creating highly polarised and spatially separated communities which concentrate deprivation, including low incomes, low skills, educational attainment, and poor health.

For example, the City of Sheffield has a housing market characterised by a stark east-west divide. To the west, the constituency of Hallam, with its large Victorian housing stock, and high performing schools, is one of the wealthiest in the country. To the east, there are large swathes of lower value inter-war and post war housing stock, where the Sheffield Fairness Commission identified that almost half those houses in the private rented sector are not meeting the decent home standard and a quarter of all homes pose a risk to the health and safety of the people living there.[34]

Low skills hold back productive growth, but it is also apparent that **low skilled populations are in part an outcome of how housing markets function** in the UK. Housing markets define neighbourhoods which serve to lock-in and exacerbate inequality through patterns of social, economic and spatial segregation. High streets in the most deprived areas are more likely to gain a takeaway, a bookmaker, or a vape shop and more likely to lose a supermarket or a public toilet, compared to the least deprived areas.[35] 'Fixing' the high street requires different approaches, including interventions to improve the public realm, but their survival depends on creating aggregate demand for more and better services.

Building socially and economically mixed communities is necessary if the challenges of economic inclusion and social mobility are to be achieved and sustained. This would mean building homes to attract higher-income families which can be situated within a wider social tenure, including affordable and desirable homes to buy and rent, for lower income families. The aim should be gentrification without the wholesale displacement of people from one poor area to another. Conversely, it is also possible to introduce lower income families into higher income areas. Oscar Newman's experiment with 'scattered housing' development in Yonkers, New York,

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[33] Katz, B & Baird, R. Towards a New System of Community Development, 2019 [https://www.thenewlocalism.com/newsletter/towards-a-new-system-of-community-development/]

[34] The Sheffield Fairness Commission, 2012

[35] Abozied, E.Z Munford, L. Todd, A, Bambra, C (2026). Unequal high streets? A spatial analysis of inequalities in health-related amenities in England from 2014-2024, Social Science & Medicine, Volume 390, 2026.

is interesting in this regard.[36] Sustainable communities are not islands that trap their inhabitants. They are porous and allow for movement in and out, to facilitate physical, economic and social mobility.

proprietary principles for place-based policy

An over concentration on housing has been one source of criticism in community-based economic development. The suggestion here is **not a housing-centric approach** to the detriment of the many other things that must be tackled in deprived areas. Nor should monies, allocated for different purposes such as skills and employment, be vired or redirected to housing.

The purpose is to pursue a wider distribution of property as a powerful framework for strengthening contemporary place-based policy in the UK. Such **ownership cannot emerge organically from market forces alone**, which tend towards consolidation, but instead requires deliberate, state-led intervention to favour small owners, subsidise first-generation proprietors, and protect fledgling ownership from financial and competitive pressures.

Rebalancing power, rebuilding local economies, and restoring civic confidence requires incremental action that prioritises community control of assets and targeted investment. At the same time, **this calls for differential treatment**—making it easier for individuals and communities to acquire property, and harder for large actors to consolidate it.

This is not solely a technical or fiscal challenge, but a cultural one. Ownership depends on renewing the desire and expectation to own, particularly in communities where dispossession has become normalised. Place-based policies that combine visible physical renewal with local decision-making can help rebuild this culture, creating the conditions in which ownership pathways are both viable and valued.

i. embed ownership pathways within place-based funding

The maintenance of public space is critical but place-based programmes must move beyond public realm investment alone, to grow and anchor affluence in place. This should include structured pathways into home and land ownership for local residents. This could include capital grants and loans for first-time buyers in designated areas, shared-equity models, and support for community land trusts to keep land values affordable over the long term. First-generation ownership requires subsidy and protection if it is to take root.

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[36] Newman, O. (1996). *Creating Defensible Space*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research. [https://www.huduser.gov/publications/pdf/def.pdf]

ii. actively tilt the market in favour of small and local owners

Disadvantaged communities require differential treatment; policy should make it easier for individuals and communities to acquire property while discouraging speculative consolidation. This could include strengthened rights of first refusal for local residents and community groups, higher taxes on empty homes and large-scale landlords, and planning rules that prioritise owner-occupation and community ownership in regeneration areas.

iii. support co-operative and community ownership institutions

Government should expand support for co-operative housing, community asset ownership, and locally governed development vehicles. These structures reduce exposure to market volatility, prevent asset stripping, and allow local wealth to circulate within communities—functioning as the modern equivalents of Belloc's small proprietorial institutions.

iv. protect emerging owners from excessive financial burdens

Early-stage owners are particularly vulnerable to high borrowing costs, taxation and insecure tenure. Place-based policy should therefore include safeguards such as capped ground rents, stable long-term tenure arrangements, and access to affordable finance, ensuring that new owners are not driven back into dependency by unsustainable costs.

v. align cultural renewal with economic reform

Finally, place-based policy should explicitly recognise the cultural dimension of ownership. Alongside physical regeneration, programmes should invest in community capacity, local leadership and civic participation, rebuilding the expectation and aspiration to own. Ownership cannot be imposed mechanically; it must be socially embedded and locally desired.

some pilot proposals

Government should establish a series of time-limited pilots in selected neighbourhoods. These pilots would test how ownership pathways, market tilts and cultural renewal can work together to deliver long-term prosperity.

i. Community Ownership Zones (COZs)

Designate a small number of neighbourhoods as Community Ownership Zones, where policy is explicitly geared towards expanding resident ownership. Within each zone, local residents and community organisations would benefit from enhanced rights to acquire land and buildings, preferential planning treatment for owner-occupied and community-owned developments, and targeted capital support for first-time ownership. This would provide local, incremental, "replanting" of property rather than uniform national schemes.

ii.   First-Generation Ownership Grant Pilot

Introduce a targeted grant programme for households with no prior property ownership history, operating within selected place-based regeneration areas. Grants would be paired with shared-equity or community land trust models to ensure long-term affordability and prevent speculative resale. This pilot would test the claim that restoring ownership requires subsidy - "gift" - at the point of entry, particularly in communities long excluded from asset ownership.

iii.   Local Right-to-Buy for Community Assets

Pilot an expanded local right-to-buy scheme giving residents and community organisations first refusal on vacant or underused land and buildings in designated areas. Assets acquired would be held in community ownership or co-operative structures, with revenues reinvested locally. This would establish protected "seed" assets capable of generating further economic independence over time.

iv.   Anti-Concentration Housing Market Testbeds

Establish pilot areas where stronger anti-concentration measures apply, such as higher transaction taxes for large landlords, restrictions on bulk purchases, and incentives for subdivision of large holdings into smaller units. The objective would be to test whether actively tilting the market in favour of small owners increases owner-occupation and local economic resilience, in line with the differential treatment principle.

v.   Ownership and Civic Culture Programme

Alongside economic interventions, pilot a civic renewal programme focused on rebuilding the culture of ownership. This would fund local advice hubs, peer-led support for new owners, and community governance training, ensuring that material pathways to ownership are reinforced by confidence, capability and expectation. As Belloc warned, ownership must be culturally desired as well as materially possible.

Evaluation and Scaling

Each pilot should be independently evaluated against clear metrics: changes in ownership rates, asset retention, local investment, and civic participation. Successful models could then be scaled across future place-based programmes, embedding the distribution of property as a core pillar of UK neighbourhood renewal.

to conclude

When reflecting on the different approaches taken by successive governments, commentary can tend towards a **'two legs good, four legs bad'** appraisal according to political affiliations. Yet, over the past 40-50 years, different administrations have diagnosed the same problems and pursued remarkably similar approaches to neighbourhood renewal. Even when the rhetoric has appeared sharply different, there has been a high degree of accordance in policy and experience. And yet no government has solved the problem of restoring communities in the longer term.

Places can and do change, for better and worse. Some are demolished and entirely erased. Others evolve more slowly and organically. But the legacy of place-based policies in the UK is not economic and social transformation. Nor is it a sharp uptake in community involvement, local volunteerism, or philanthropy. It is rather a simmering discontent, anger, and resentment within the communities targeted by the very policies that were intended to help them. This has brought us to the position where established mainstream political parties and institutions are struggling to convince and build public trust.

If centre parties can't grasp that a fundamental change in direction is required then others just might, and community policies could start to resemble a more homogeneous, 'mono-cultural', understanding of our shared values. It is important that we learn from past failures as well as the good examples which are out there, and the Government's new Pride in Place strategy has the potential to build on these lessons. Yet for it to succeed it must go a lot further.

It will not be enough to combine the best of previous regeneration models. Britain must move towards a restoration of neighbourhoods where residents hold the keys — literally and figuratively — to their own futures. If the country can match renewal with ownership, and self-governance with investment, we may yet rediscover the quiet strength of a nation and its communities, built on many hands, many homes, and many hopes: a modern distributism for a broken Britain, in search of its centre.

This paper discusses the evolution of regeneration and neighbourhood renewal policy in the UK and argues that, despite sustained intervention over several decades, these approaches have consistently failed to deliver lasting change for the most disadvantaged communities. The core weakness does not primarily lie in a lack of participation, partnership or community voice—important though these are—but in the failure to give residents a genuine stake in the economic future of their neighbourhoods. The proposal set out here is to move beyond micro-interventions and civic management towards a more ambitious settlement: one that raises living standards not only through higher incomes, but by enabling widespread ownership of property, land and productive assets as the foundation of renewal. Drawing on the distributist tradition, this approach re-orients place-based policy around proprietary principles—expanding ownership, limiting the concentration of wealth, and embedding economic power locally.