

NAVCA and ACRE have produced this resource as part of a project supporting the VCFSE sector and forming unitary and strategic authorities to work together through devolution and local government reorganisation.

## Introduction

This document contains information collated from the experience of NAVCA and ACRE members of different models and approaches to neighbourhood governance. The term LIO [local infrastructure organisation] is used as a generic term to describe members of both NAVCA and ACRE.

## Existing neighbourhood governance – key learning

- In most areas, neighbourhoods are all defined differently by different statutory agencies. With these different footprints, it is much more difficult to access good local knowledge about communities.
- Neighbourhood governance structures often have boundaries that are not coterminous with existing structures, such as those within health systems.
- Multiple boundaries from different sources are likely to lead to duplication of effort, wasted resources, confusion for residents and the VCFSE sector, and an increase in complexity for statutory partners.
- Where boundaries are coterminous with existing local authority and health systems they do not always collaborate, resulting in the same people and organisations attending multiple meetings and being consulted over similar issues, and in some situations, both having workers on the ground working on similar projects.
- As local authorities and health systems are both going through significant changes at the same time, it makes good sense to align boundaries, governance and delivery structures so that there is a joined up approach between them, and change can happen in tandem. This is unlikely to happen.

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- Most existing neighbourhood structures [but not all] have membership that is made up only of elected local councillors.
- Neighbourhood governance structures whose membership and decision making is only drawn from elected members, risks losing the insight and experiences of a wider group from communities, the VCFSE sector, business and statutory partners. The risks are:
  - an assumption that councillors know their local areas well when this may not actually be the case
  - a diversity of voices from community, VCFSE sector and other statutory partners is absent from discussions and decision-making
  - funding may be allocated to favoured areas or pet projects rather than based on evidenced need.
- Neighbourhood structures that bring together local councillors, public sector agencies, the VCFSE sector, communities, and businesses have a better understanding of local issues and concerns and are able to allocate resources more effectively.
- Neighbourhood structures are effective as a direct result of the positive culture created, where there is a willingness to work together, and there is trust and shared respect.
- Representation on neighbourhood boards should aim to reflect the diversity of the local population.
- Subgroups or task and finish groups which report into neighbourhood structures on specific areas of interest are an effective way of including more expertise and can also enable a wider group from the VCFSE to participate more effectively based on their expert knowledge, geography and location. Where there are items of common interest and neighbourhood governance structures work together to share ideas and information, this has been a useful way of including organisations working on a larger footprint, attending one meeting rather than several.

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- Neighbourhood boards need to be resourced properly to make a difference, with budgets large enough to achieve real change for communities. This could include maximising resources across a system by aligning local authority and health neighbourhoods and their funding streams for the VCFSE and communities.
- The VCFSE sector and communities, facilitated by local infrastructure organisations are often expected to participate in neighbourhood structures without the costs of participation being reimbursed. Where council officers are willing to fund participation there is often no line in the budget that enables this.
- Areas where there is an extensive network of parish and town councils such as large rural areas, tend to have limited or no alternative forms of neighbourhood governance. Where they do exist, these are additional and sit on top of parish and town councils so there is an element of confusion on the role of each one, and risk of duplication without effective coordination.
- Experience from existing neighbourhood governance structures suggests that local people want to be asked and consulted but then want to see things change as a result, with an ongoing interest in their local area. To succeed it will be important to avoid short-term transactional interactions with neighbourhoods.

## The context: English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/english-devolution-and-community-empowerment-bill>

The Bill will introduce a requirement on all local authorities in England to establish effective neighbourhood governance, to move decision making closer to residents, empowering ward councillors to address the issues most important to their communities at a local level.

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The intention is that communities will be empowered to have a voice in local decisions, and that ward councillors will be empowered to take a greater leadership role in driving forward the priorities of their communities. This will help to move decision-making closer to residents, so decisions are made by people who understand local needs. Additionally, developing neighbourhood-based approaches will provide opportunities to organise public services to meet local needs better. It is expected that funding will be devolved to neighbourhood level so these governance structures will have decision-making and financial responsibilities.

This Bill will introduce a duty on all local authorities to make appropriate arrangements for effective governance of any neighbourhood area. It provides the Secretary of State with the power, by way of regulations, to define a neighbourhood area and to specify the parameters of what arrangements will be appropriate to meet this duty. As of February 2026, the draft regulations are yet to be published.

## Surrey County Council – pilot Neighbourhood Area Committees

Central Surrey Voluntary Action [CSVA] were asked by Surrey County Council to help convene VCFSE and community participation in two pilot Neighbourhood Area Committees [NAC]. The council chose to adopt the model of 7:7:7 representation. This comprises:

- 7 representatives from elected members – county, district and parish/town councils
- 7 representatives from statutory partners including, police, fire as well as housing providers and business
- 7 representatives from the VCFSE and community.

Each NAC agreed its governance and structure. In one of the pilots the elected councillors felt that one of their group should chair. The NAC as a whole felt that the chair should be nominated from within the NAC membership by the members themselves, which is what happened.

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Decision-making was by all 21 members of the NAC, not just the elected members and the NAC decided how to run its meetings and set its own priorities.

Another one of the pilot NACs does not have significant involvement from the VCFSE or community, despite the intention to do this, and met in a council office so the meeting felt like a council meeting. The other pilots met in community buildings and village halls giving a very different positive feel and approach to the discussions.

You can read more about the four pilot Neighbourhood Area Committees in Surrey [here](#).

## NAVCA member experience of existing neighbourhood governance

Existing neighbourhood governance that sits outside the parish and town council system, may be known by a variety of names such as locality boards, community panels, community boards, community partnerships, neighbourhood boards or local area committees.

Membership is predominantly drawn from elected local councillors, or only elected members, but may also include representatives from statutory partners, the VCFSE sector and community representatives. Some have decision-making powers and funding to distribute, others take a more consultative approach to inform local communities about the work the council is doing.

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## A diversity of approaches

**Council 1 – North West England** have created three locality boards based on the footprint of the previous three district councils, [population of each around 50-80,000K]. Each locality board is made up of local elected councillors and does not have input from other sources. The board is responsible for a community funding pot used for small community level projects. The steady and competent approach taken by the boards has helped achieve what has been needed locally.

**Council 2 – North West England** has created eight community panels primarily of elected members. The community panels also have members of the public on them. Appointments are made for a period of 12 months only, so that the whole process of recruitment is repeated every year.

The boundaries of the eight community panels are the same as for NHS Primary Care Networks and cover 30-50,000 people. Although they work on the same boundaries, health and local authority do not work together.

The community panels run community meetings, usually as public drop-ins, with council teams and key organisations like Citizens Advice, Age UK etc. also present. These are orientated to the community finding out about local support and services.

Each community panel has a community funding budget, which works well for small hyper-local VCFSE organisations but is more challenging for larger regional / subregional organisations such as Citizens Advice, who end up making multiple funding applications for what previously was a single pot, and for 12 months at a time only. This leaves a gap in funding for the VCFSE, as there are no strategic multi-year grants or contracts available.

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**Council in Northern England** intends to create 30 multi-agency community partnerships by 2029. Community partnerships will bring together local councillors, public sector agencies, communities, and businesses with the aim to get things done in their local area. Each will have their own action plan to tackle issues most relevant to them. Additionally, the council is investing in a network of community anchor organisations as trusted place-based systems partners to work alongside the councils to strengthen local relationships and optimise community resources to improve community wellbeing and resilience.

**Three district councils in South East England** all have previously had place boards, led by health, local authority and VCFSE sector. The place board met regularly, communicated well and made a discernible difference. It enabled consultation, meant that all three partners were close to the detail of what was needed in area and had good leadership from elected members and council officials. Task and finish groups were used to bring in a broader range of expertise on specific issues. In two of the boards areas the VCFSE has been able to influence policy decisions by both council and health systems. The result has been powerful, targeted and connected working.

Reflecting on this, the CEO of the LIO identified that this effective working was a direct result of the culture created, a willingness to work together, trust and shared respect. This is exemplified in one area where a change in CEO of the council disrupted existing good working relationships, as the new CEO was not well connected into the area and did not have an interest in the VCFSE sector.

Council in Southern England has previously run neighbourhood forums that were very well supported and were able to direct hyperlocal work and respond to the voice of residents. They were attended by council officers and VCFSE organisations as well as community representatives. As community and charity work was centralised into a town centre hub, away from the neighbourhoods themselves [drive by the council to co-locate services in one building], outreach dropped off, and the forums started to dissolve. One remains that is maintained and driven by the enthusiasm and skill of a single person.

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## Staff teams and budgets

**Cheshire West and Chester** council have seven community partnerships to help influence, address and understand the local health needs in each of them. The intention is that community partnerships build relationships and make change happen. Each covers around 50,000 people and is a cross-sector partnership of health, VCFSE, local authority and community. Community partnerships are hosted and supported by the LIO [Cheshire West Voluntary Action] whose role is to put into action the vision and ambitions of the seven partnerships, which as a whole cover Cheshire West Place. Each community partnership sets their own priorities and brings together local organisations across different sectors and people with lived experience. The LIO convenes the partnerships and works with partners to deliver the agreed action plan for the partnerships. This work is funded by Cheshire West Council.

There are eight Community Boards in a **South Midlands council** area, each with their own council staff team including a Community Board Manager. The role of the staff team is to identify local challenges by working with local residents, community groups, VCFSE, statutory partners to identify solutions to the challenges together.

The purpose of boards is to be close to communities and be part of neighbourhoods, however all power and decision making remains with elected councillors. They seek views, consult, take advice and guidance from other people, but the voting and decision making is done by elected members with oversight by the cabinet member for that area of responsibility. The funding available for each board to spend has reduced to £20,000 per annum so they have very little ability to make a meaningful difference.

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Each board operates subgroups or task and finish groups which report into it on specific areas of interest. This has been an effective way of bringing in more expertise and enables the VCFSE to participate more effectively based on their expert knowledge, geography and location. For areas of common interest, the boards try to work together to share ideas and information. This is a useful way of including organisations working on the old county/sub regional footprint so that they only have to participate in one meeting rather than eight.

In this area, the boundaries for community boards and health neighbourhoods are not coterminous, both have workers present in the areas who do very similar things. Health and local authority are not working as a single system but two separate ones. There needs to be a much more joined up approach between the two – both are subject to significant change, and it needs to happen in tandem.

The VCFSE sector and local infrastructure should not be expected to participate in neighbourhood governance without the costs of participation and expertise being recognised and funded. The expectation of many statutory partners is that the VCFSE sector can simply come along and bring knowledge and insight and not get anything in return.

**A northern city council** has five area committees mirroring the five parliamentary constituency boundaries, with membership entirely from elected councillors, supported by a council staff secretariat. Each area committee has a large staff team a 15 to 20 people, with an area manager, team leaders, wardens and assistant wardens for each area.

The area committees have been responsible for grant giving to the VCFSE and allocation of council funding sources such as the Household Support Fund and UK Shared Prosperity Fund. There was a tendency to fund well below the amount applied for by VCFSE organisations, some elements of favouritism for particular organisations in areas, and decision-making informed by informal information. All power and control lie with the councillors as decision-makers, with decisions often strongly influenced by politics, that are not always the most appropriate outcome for the area.

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## Self-defined neighbourhoods

In **Sheffield City Council** there is a local area committee system, with seven in total for 28 wards. Membership is only from elected councillors for those wards. These are thought to provide a useful focus point, allowing more relaxed questioning and roundtable discussions. Commonly presentations are made by statutory partners such as health or police. Although there are well publicised routes for how local people can connect to the committees, they are not a forum that facilitates listening and conversation.

Sheffield now also has 147 **citizen self-defined neighbourhoods** of around 5000 people each. These do not mirror ward boundaries, but are aligned to natural neighbourhood areas. This is about **creating sites of co-production and partnership, more than consultation**. They create the opportunity for place based conversations and opportunities to do something that local people want and need. Each neighbourhood area has a community anchor institution to convene the conversation and help neighbourhoods to articulate what they would like, identify the resources available and help with implementation.

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## Questions for consideration about neighbourhood governance

- How will it be evaluated?
- How will this be part of the democratic system?
- How does membership of the governance structure represent the diversity of the neighbourhood? How are people and communities included?
- Might this become at best a coalition of the willing – at worse a gathering of the great and the good?
- How are meetings held? Are they public, streamed online, held in accessible community venues, with translation, at a time that people are available? Are they consultative and welcoming of participation?
- How do people know about them, their work and how they can get involved?
- How do professionals help people be involved and not dominate or direct?
- How are conversations encouraged and enabled?