

# **Understanding the Vitality of Neighbourhood Governance in Terms of Sites, Spaces and Spheres**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Targeted neighbourhood action is a long-standing feature of urban policy and a neighbourhood focus has been part of New Labour policy initiatives concerned with tackling disadvantage, improving service delivery, renewing democracy and reinvigorating civil society. The aim of this paper is to consider insights into the practice of neighbourhood governance as applied in English neighbourhood renewal relative to a conceptual framework proposed by Lepine, Smith, Sullivan and Taylor (2007). It is suggested that neighbourhood governance can be understood in terms of sites, spaces or spheres.

It is argued that the neighbourhood has most often been a site for actions determined beyond it - a defined spatial territory within which policies are enacted and services delivered. Smith et al's (2007) examination of the theory and practice of neighbourhood governance since 1997 suggests that opportunities have been created for involvement in new governance spaces, but that it is far from clear that a new sphere of governance (which would be characterised by devolved power and effective connections to other governance levels) has been – or will be – created.

Although rhetorical appeals to neighbourhood sometimes suggest that simple solutions are to be found in the neighbourhood, persistent tensions and dilemmas characterise attempts to establish a new approach to governance at this level. Also explored by contributors to Smith et al, these include issues of citizenship and democracy; targeting, efficiency and equity; and cohesion and diversity (in the foreground of recent debate). Further developments in neighbourhood governance can be expected as the Local Government White Paper published in October 2006 (CLG) is implemented. The neighbourhood may have a place in mechanisms for scrutiny and challenge, alongside the promised reduction in central performance management, but there is more to the creation of an effective sphere of neighbourhood governance than this. The paper will review some of these developments and will argue that addressing the tensions inherent in neighbourhood governance requires dialogue, openness to learning, a willingness to take risks and “a capacity on the part of government to exercise its meta governance role in a way which allows the

development of other effective spheres of power and action” (Lepine, Smith and Taylor, 2007).

**Key Words:** neighbourhood, governance, renewal