

Leadership in Localism – Making Localism Work for You

10am - 4:30pm, 7th July, Palmer Building, University of Reading

Conference Report

This conference was looking closely at the Localism agenda and its impact on communities and how communities can use the new legislation to improve their areas.

Prof. Gavin Parker, Professor of Planning Studies, University of Reading

His key message was around understanding the motivations of those communities whom the government is wishing to engage. The Neighbourhood Planning process will bring together a wide-range of people and need to respond to different needs, both local and national. Incentives will include financial and personal reasons. Lessons to be remembered:

- We already have good past experience in engaging communities in the planning process
- Need to collect evidence and knowledge to support the plans
- Challenge the idea of sustainable development
- Opportunity to co-construct the agenda for neighbourhoods

David Buxton, Policy Advisor on Neighbourhood Planning, DCLG

The government sees Neighbourhood Plans (NPs) located within the Localism and *growth agenda*. The ethos of Localism is to devolve power and decision-making to the lowest possible level, ie. our communities. Decentralisation is what the government is trying to achieve, with the Big Society being its final ambition.

The Localism bill, currently being heard in the House of Lords, is attempting to provide greater powers and abilities of decision-making to communities through a package of new rights:

Neighbourhood Plans (NPs) – the right to plan through this process will be a main commitment. By allowing communities to form natural neighbourhood boundaries, places are intended to be planned specifically for the communities, businesses and people living and working in areas.

Right to Challenge – the right for community or other voluntary organisations the ability to tender for and run services previously undertaken by the local authority.

Right to Buy – the right for communities or other voluntary organisations to purchase and manage assets. The assets will have been identified and listed as having community benefit.

Right to Build – the right for communities or other voluntary organisations to hold community referendum to pre-approve development types or areas in their neighbourhood for development.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is currently in draft form and being debated. There is intended to be no regional spatial strategies, although a duty to work across administrative boundaries is expected. Where communities accept developments they will receive CIL payments to be retained and used within the neighbourhood.

NPs are intended to allow communities to take greater control in the future of their areas, ideally through a light-touch process. By allowing communities to decide on future developments it is intended that their innovation and creativity will inspire new ideas and learning. It will enable small-scale development to move forward more quickly and provide a permissive regime for planning. If

communities are happy with the current planning process, their local plans, and do not require amendments then the process can continue as it currently exists. There is a general assumption that parish boundaries are likely to constitute a neighbourhood. Where these do not exist there is an assumption that neighbourhoods will naturally form around specific local ideas, perhaps specifically defined suburban areas or business districts. The Local Planning Authority (LPA) has a duty to support communities in their planning and will make the order to support NPs.

Where NPs do develop there may be a Neighbourhood Development Order, such as one regarding permitted development, whereby communities agree to allow such developments, as already receiving planning permission or outline planning permission. This is intended to speed the development process. In areas where development plans, such as Village Design Statements or Parish Plans, these may form the basis of NPs, if acceptable for communities. NPs are intended to be spatial plans around land-use and development and not be prescriptive about specific design of developments.

NPs need to comply with several EU directives, such as Environmental Impact Assessments and Human Rights obligations, as well as meet national policy objectives. They will include a right to call a community referendum around specific issues, such as extensions to neighbourhood boundaries or permitted development.

Current changes:

- Businesses now a full part of NPs.
- Minimum size for a Neighbourhood Forum is 21 individuals.
- Neighbourhood Forums are open to anyone who lives or works in an area plus elected council members.
- Neighbourhood Forums can promote business but plans must reflect the character of an area.
- Neighbourhood Forums must take reasonable steps to be inclusive across the neighbourhood area.
- Allowance for government and local authorities to examine NPs and charge for this service.
- Neighbourhoods can cross LPA boundaries.
- Additional protection for heritage.

NPs Front Runners: is a programme to enable local authorities to “gain insight into how the provisions for neighbourhood planning are likely to work in practice following Commencement of the Localism Bill. Councils will be expected to undertake a planning project in close collaboration with an established community group or parish council in a manner similar to that envisaged in the Localism Bill, or, in business areas, with a local business organisation.”(DCLG, 2011, <http://www.communities.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/planningsystem/neighbourhoodplanningguides>). The programme works under current planning legislation and aims to create Development Plan Document (DPD) or Neighbourhood Development Order (NDO). Further bidding rounds are anticipated in autumn 2011 but for a full map of current projects follow this link: <http://maps.google.co.uk/maps/ms?ie=UTF8&hq=&hnear=&source=embed&oe=UTF8&msa=0&msid=201745166119078231783.0004a4a3077a97f4fbbdf>.

David Burbage, Leader at Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (RBWM)

They have been working hard in the area to improve dialogue and communications between community and voluntary organisations and the local authority. Examples were provided, such as

the community grants application process, reducing this long-winded (potentially 16 month) process and a long application form, to a rolling deadline and simplified application process.

Participatory Budgeting: In line with the Big Society agenda RBWM also have been developing participatory budgeting with communities. They cited several different ways of participatory budgeting used within the local authority;

1. Thematic budgets – based around specific subjects
2. Geographic budgets – based on specific locations
3. Micro (Neighbourhood) - £50k has been allocated, with £2k maximum grant available, to deliver neighbourhood projects (further information can be found here: http://www.rbwm.gov.uk/web/consultation_participatory_budgeting.htm)
4. Elected members – receive a small allocation (£1-2k) for projects they support.

For the larger thematic and geographic programmes the council undertakes an annual household survey. Firstly confirming the householder wishes to spend the allocation on these projects and secondly, providing multiple choice questions for their responses. Last year they received a 75% response rate asking for the money to be spent on cycling provision, trees and winter maintenance of roads. There is an approximate split of budget allocation for Windsor, Maidenhead and Ascot/Sunnings of £50/50/25k respectively.

Actively promote Big Society through an active group, discussing related issues, and Big Society days and exhibitions. The group currently discusses a wide-range of topics including:

- Night-time economy and licensing
- Devolution of powers to Parish and Town Councils
- Adopt-a-Street scheme
- Participatory Budgeting
- Transparency
- Hydro-Power small-scale projects
- Incentive schemes eg. Recycle Bank
- Ways into volunteering
- Guildhall volunteering
- Project CareBank

They further encourage employee ownership, garden sharing for allotments schemes and the community use of public buildings.

Peter Couchman, Plunkett Foundation

He talked about the Community Right to Buy, which currently he sees travelling through Parliament and becoming more of a 'community right to ask nicely'. The Plunkett Foundation (<http://www.plunkett.co.uk>) helps rural communities through community-ownership to take control of the issues affecting them. They support the Localism agenda but see it as a step forward and not a solution.

He provided many interesting examples of current community asset management, such as:

- The community which didn't have a local shop and therefore installed a portacabin in their local pub car park.

- The community which bought the local pub after closure and after 16 months it is now a thriving pub, shop, library and Korean food hub. The project has shown the vibrancy and built confidence in this community.

His organisation helps communities with the *Right to Try*, providing help and support during the asset transfer and set-up time. Their 260-strong network of community shops is now forming a wider cooperative; forming further partnerships, increasing their spending power and influence and improving learning and support for its members.

The loss of a service can deeply affect a community and is akin to the grieving process, with emotions going from denial and anger to acceptance. It is once the community accepts the loss, he believes, they can then find the resources and capacity amongst themselves to start building new and better services.

Frances Northrop, Transition in Action, Transition Town Movement (TTM)

The Transition Town Movement (TTM) was founded by Rob Hopkins, a permaculture lecturer, and is based around the ideas of peak-oil and energy resilience, and the subsequent remodelling by local communities of their neighbourhoods. More information can be found by following this link: <http://www.transitionnetwork.org>. Their ethos has always been around local communities working together to improve their environments and futures.

Lots of different interests form around the TTM as local groups develop their own plans. Much of their work is carried out through voluntary delivery of workshops, such as cycle repair or urban food growing.

The TTM is increasingly working to improve local economic gains, retaining the flow of money within local producers, traders and business. Many places, for example Lewes and Brixton, are introducing local currency that aims to encourage trade within a network of local business, retaining the economic value.

Community-owned renewable energy production is also a growing project area. Bath Community Energy (<http://www.bathcommunityenergy.co.uk>) is to develop and finance 1.5 MW of projects, enough to power 1000 houses. They are focusing on solar, photovoltaic (PV), hydro and wind projects. In Lewes, the community owned Ovesco (<http://www.ovesco.co.uk>), raised over £300k locally by selling community shares in the venture. New work is looking at the retrofitting of existing housing stock by taking advantage of government grants, developing a model to provide this service that is replicable across the UK.

The TTM pulls together sustainable objectives for economic growth, social well-being and environmental improvements. Their organisation is concerned about the time and capacity required by communities to understand the various challenges facing us in the 21st century. People are needed who have time, skills and motivation.

Rev. Dr. Malcolm Brown, Director of Mission and Public Affairs, The Archbishop's Council

There are certain philosophies which link across faith and non-faith communities and it is these within the Big Society idea that the Church supports. However, there are concerns about the complexity and unintended consequences of this agenda and the current austerity measures where the two programmes overlap. The Church would not support Big Society if it was only a policy,

funding or voluntary push or cover-up for a programme of spending cuts. Their belief is that Big Society has the chance to change the political discourse, rebalancing power between the state, local authorities and communities.

The question he posed was, are we a society of strangers or a community of communities and where are we headed to in future? How can these ideas be used to change the balance towards a synchronicity. People flourish best when in groups smaller than the state but larger than families. Intermediate institutions can play a role; in the education sector Universities represent their staff and students, Church's represent the faith communities and trade unions stand to improve their member's rights. There is considerable debate between government parties as to the trajectory that society is taking.

The Church is also concerned that some of the vocabulary used around the Localism agenda and Big Society idea, is being used by those who don't really believe in the power of communities but do wish to reduce the power of the state. The voluntary sector needs to become the lubrication in the wheels of Big Society to make the idea work and strengthen communities. The private sector can also cause problems within local communities, not always the public sector; he cited Tesco's and its growth strategy, as an example of where tensions can be caused.

Faith communities across the globe share in a belief in good for all, therefore Big Society is the norm. The Church does not want to provide government with an excuse to ignore their obligations but is happy to embrace a positive change. Many church buildings are reviewing how they are used within their communities; a community shop has been established in the nave of one. The Church also has a global reach through its network and is spreading the message that neighbourliness equals the Big Society. However, the Church cannot start from a presumption of neutrality within communities. They have to accept variety but look for similarity.

Workshop 1: The Right to Challenge and the Right to Build; Take advantage of commissioning Presented by Shelly Hambrecht, Community Support Manager and Ruwan Uduwera-Perera, Consultant and Community Activist both from Empowering West Berkshire

What is commissioning? – Put simply it is the process of planning, paying for, monitoring and reviewing services; choosing what to buy, who will supply it, how much it will cost, where and by whom it will be delivered.

By working with service users, providers and the local authority, a clear understanding of the service, lessons learnt by previous delivery providers and any new objectives can be determined. Decisions on tender documents are based upon the original specification, quality of service from suppliers and terms and conditions of contracts. They may also be assessed on the involvement of users if appropriate. Commissioning is a cycle and doesn't end when the contract is awarded; ongoing monitoring and review needs to happen and within this the flexibility for change.

Community Right to Challenge –

- The government thinks that innovation in public services can offer greater value for tax-payers.
- The best councils are constantly looking for new and better ways to design and deliver services.
- Recognising the potential of community groups, charitable organisations and social enterprise.
- How do voluntary and community groups get a proper hearing?

- Red tape!

The Localism Bill will give groups, parish councils and local authority employees the right to express an interest in running/taking over a public sector run service. The local authority must consider and respond to this challenge. Where accepting the challenge, local authorities, run a procurement exercise for the service in which the challenging organisation can bid. This should make it easier for local groups with good ideas to drive improvement in local services.

Community Right to Buy –

- Across the country when local amenities have been forced with sale or closure, community groups have taken them over.
- Communities and groups suffer significant challenges when it comes to buying or taking over community assets.
- Not enough time to raise finance and organise a bid.
- Competing with private enterprises.

The Localism Bill contains a proposal that local authorities maintain a list of assets of community value. When listed assets come up for sale or change of ownership, community groups will have time to prepare a bid and raise the capital, for when it comes onto the open market.

Recommendations are to encourage greater partnership working with local authorities to encourage new ideas and understanding within their organisations; look at outcomes and assess against the added-value a community organisation can bring to a bid or service; understand the evidence and research needed to back up bids, ensure good quality baseline data.

Workshop 2: Community Enterprise

Presented by Tim Palmer, Berkshire County Coordinator, CCB and Graham Tapley, Director, CR6 Publishing Ltd

There are lots of different models of community enterprise, funding options and organisations to support community enterprise. One organisation, Community Builders, previously under DCLG, provide support and funding for community asset management and enterprise (<http://www.communitybuildersfund.org.uk>).

In Caterham, a public asset was due to be sold but a partnership developed between existing users in order to pursue the transfer and retain the asset. There are also options around selling local shares to raise finance, and interest, in a community project. Furthermore, they recommend asking local professional services for their assistance, they can only say no, and they might say yes to a local venture.

It is important to develop a good business plan, including all paid staff and volunteers. This builds confidence in potential investors and provides a sound platform upon which to develop ideas. Local expertise, as mentioned above, is helpful in restricting costs but time pressures can be conflicting in terms of voluntary work against paid for advice. Volunteers in any organisation will need support and ideally opportunities for training and development, increasing their confidence and subsequently improved performance for tasks or projects.

Business Forums can provide a useful local partnership, delivering a brand image for a town, increasing footfall and sharing knowledge or training opportunities. There are opportunities to link

into village or community partnerships to see how each can support and provide services for the other.

The Twyford Business Forum presented as a case study, now has over 60 members, from an initial start of four, each paying £100 annually towards projects undertaken. The revenue raised pays for community events, such as the Christmas Fair. They invite the local media to meetings, which they are happy to oblige and support. The partnership allows clusters of related businesses to block advertised, reducing costs, and has built trust between partners, generating further business from within the group. Other projects include discount vouchers applicable to many of the group's members.

Recommendations for sustaining a business forum model that works include:

- Involve a local champion who can encourage businesses to come together.
- Be clear initially why a forum can be good for businesses (increase awareness) and then how the businesses can benefit the community (increase local support through events etc.).
- Find a good local venue and time convenient for the majority of businesses – pub and after closing (retail) 5:45pm.
- With an early evening start, provide refreshments at a nominal fee. The fee can also include a gesture for an outside speaker. In the case of Twyford around £3-4 with the pub providing the refreshments.
- Key for attendance – always follow up just prior to the meeting to see who is coming. Important for two reasons; firstly, to cater for food and secondly, to remind people that the event is going to take place. This is particularly important as you are starting off a forum.
- Set an agenda and get input from forum members on agenda items.
- Chair should keep control over the agenda.
- Give attendees the chance to present themselves briefly each session.
- Minutes to all attendees.
- Encourage the use of an e-forum between members and highlight any local news or publicity of interest.