

HOW LOCAL IS LOCALISM? THE GRASSROOTS VIEW

Abstract: *Community leaders tell me why the government's localism agenda isn't really helping local people take charge of their areas. They suggest ways in which Localism Watch can change the picture.*

It's official. Our Coalition government is driving its policies in a localist direction. Through the Localism Act and other measures, councils enjoy new powers to develop new models of local public service delivery and commissioning. The result – we are told - is a thriving voluntary and community sector.

But policies can only work if they are built around people's real needs, experiences and perceptions. The Localism Act itself is an 'empty pot': its precise relevance will only emerge through how its clauses are applied and communities respond. If localism as a policy direction is working on the ground, this will surely be manifest in how people locally think and act, right across the country.

To test this hypothesis, I interviewed a small but diverse sample of people actively involved in running their localities. They include councillors, council officers, trade union officials and leaders of community groups. To broaden my perspective, I also met academics specialising in community issues and a member of the government-commissioned consortium advising local groups on their new 'localist' rights.

To differing degrees, my interviewees were aware that the government's agenda included localism. Most, though not all, had heard of the Localism Act. But very few had a clear picture of its contents, the rights and responsibilities it conferred, or its implications for public services. Council staff, for their part, all reported that localism had unfairly raised expectations of greater powers and resources for community groups. They cited instances where time and effort that could have been used more productively had to be devoted to resolving this misunderstanding.

Few people knew or understood what the Act's [General Power of Competence \(GPoC\)](#) meant. Most politicians were adopting a wait-and-see approach: neither their council officers nor their political parties had offered them training on the GPoC. Because of impending cuts, council officers were increasingly being forced to "think out of the box" on how to fund, commission and deliver statutory services.

Trade unions reported extensive job losses, exacerbated by what they saw as a decreased strategic understanding among council leaders and chief executives of how key functions could be effectively re-structured. In particular, community liaison – already a Cinderella service with most authorities - was becoming diluted to the point of tokenism.

The pattern of local representative structures in England is patchy. In the big cities, elected parish councils are all but absent. Elsewhere, only the largest parish councils are 'precepted' – with tax-raising powers and qualified clerks. Outside local government, few community leaders were clear on the respective roles of different tiers of councils, or the relevant contact points.

It appears that the GPoC, far from liberating localities from central government control, is creating a new postcode lottery. Rural and suburban communities, served by a hierarchy of

county, district and parish councils, can more readily apply the new provisions than socially diverse inner city areas with single-tier councils.

My discussions revealed that many local groups have made preliminary enquiries about the Community Right to Challenge. None, however, had made a formal expression of interest leading to a contracting-out of services. Nevertheless, the right's existence – and the positive tone of the government-sponsored [My Community Rights](#) site – have resulted in potential 'challengers' and council officers spending time and resources clarifying the regulations and, occasionally, mentoring aborted bids. This experience has not, however, deterred interest in the Right to Challenge. With further funding cuts projected, unions have raised the threat of "Trojan Horse" bids, backed by the likes of G4S and Serco - the latter having now registered itself as a charity in preparation for this.

Of greater immediate relevance is councils' use of existing provisions for outsourcing and asset transfer. West Sussex – like some other authorities – wishes to [outsource](#) all but a fragment of its services. It has issued detailed guidance for community capital asset transfers, aimed at voluntary and community organisations and social enterprises. Similarly, it is encouraging employee owned or led mutuals. The net result, along with significant job losses, has been the mutualisation of its Adult Education service through a questionable procurement process and – in a curiously broad interpretation of localism - outsourcing its Adult Care service to Essex Cares.

Most interviewees agreed that community asset transfer provisions could potentially help preserve a locality's character and sustainability. But as one contact put it, "it's come three years too late". Austerity raises the likelihood that councils or other owners of the assets – who may not have properly maintained them – will now seek to offload them to community groups, with all the inherent responsibilities and liabilities.

Few groups believe that they have the necessary skills or resources to run community assets, or a desire to become social enterprises. Some mentioned the well-reported [community co-operative](#) formed to save and manage the Ivy House pub in Nunhead, under the Community Right to Bid. They noted, however, that the body in question had access to unusually high levels of funding and professional expertise.

Only two Consultees knew that the Coalition had replaced five decades' of detailed national planning policy guidance with an 'impressionistic' [National Planning Policy Framework](#) whose default setting is 'sustainable development' – whose precise meaning it refuses to define. Only one of my contact communities had a well-established and informed coalition. Even then, activists' efforts were hindered by the council's reduced capacity to manage the local planning process.

On [neighbourhood planning](#), interviewees highlighted the diversity of development pressures across England. Despite the government's offer of greater local discretion, activists cited the unwillingness of many councils to engage with communities, plus 'creeping central government control' the planning decisions that really mattered.

In London's neighbourhoods, there has been an historic lack of clear, accountable decision-making, coupled with mounting development pressures and public sector cuts. Community leaders here argued that the 'new localism' was breeding unprecedented tensions and a growing sense of disempowerment.

For instance, a long catalogue of decisions and practices by Southwark Council, including the [Elephant and Castle](#) redevelopment, was benefitting the development lobby and sidelining established communities. In Hackney, [unrepresentative groups](#), styling themselves as 'neighbourhood forums', had (to date, unsuccessfully) campaigned to secure formal council recognition. They aim to promote the interests of a sub-section of an ethnic group by unsustainably overdeveloping four of the borough's wards.

Rural communities, too, feel unequal to the challenge of major planning applications that offer them no real social, economic or environmental benefits, but reward large corporate investors.

Thousands of properties in areas extending from London to the North of England have been blighted because of the lengthy, complex and remote decision-making processes for high speed rail and mineral (e.g., fracking) proposals. I spoke to residents of a Staffordshire village resisting a mining company's application to [opencast adjacent Green Belt land](#) of high environmental quality. Like similar cases, the final decision rests not with them or their council but the Secretary of State. To complicate matters further, the mining company has provoked community divisions by offering token funding for local amenities.

The government's promotion of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) as a partial compensation for major developments raised mixed responses. Of particular interest was ["Boles' Bung"](#), whereby communities accepting higher levels of new housing development stand to gain a greater slice of CIL revenue.

Activists observed that offering sweeteners was a long-established technique of big developers. To them, it demonstrated the fundamental inability of 'folk in power' to appreciate how local communities really work. They said that large, disruptive developments, by breaking up communities, would nullify any benefits generated by new community infrastructure. In any case, bureaucratic hurdles were likely to delay or scupper the provision of such facilities.

What, then, can Localism Watch offer people at the grassroots – and anyone else messed up by 'localism'?

Overwhelmingly, consultees agreed that a simple summary of the legislation itself, and other parts of the localism agenda, would bring clarity to the debate, and help inform broader alliances to expose and challenge the government's policies.

They also felt that issues like the GPoC – particularly when applied to outsourcing and top-down moves to marketise the community organisations – should be monitored and reported, with input from activists and trade unions. The government's commitment to expand the CIL meant that this, too, should be critiqued in Localism Watch, as ongoing cuts may tempt councils to use the levy as a source of replacement revenue.

Government-sponsored online guidance gives the impression that the new 'Community Rights' are attractive and easy to deliver. All my interviewees asked for clear explanation of what these rights actually mean – supported with 'real world' examples. A similar approach was requested for monitoring and challenging the way in which community assets are designated and transferred.

There was a very strong desire for a clear presentation/exposé of neighbourhood planning in Localism Watch, comparing and contrasting the government's promises of a 'control shift' with the reality on the ground. The powers of communities to determine local development remain subservient to those of councils, while more of the biggest planning decisions are being made centrally, by Ministers.

Equally, activists felt it important not to focus entirely on a 'pageant of powerlessness and despair'. They all told me that through their work, by accident or design, they had acquired many new skills and attributes. They specifically asked to have a platform where they could set out, celebrate and 'trade' what they had learnt and demonstrate their refusal to accept the government's version as the only true one.

There were many requests for Localism Watch to include a 'jargon buster' – in part, to help community groups negotiate the procedural jungle. Some also recognised the government's use of the term 'localism' itself as part of a wider pattern. Like wolves in sheep's clothing, politicians have a tendency to misappropriate and twist their enemies' terminology. Simply put, the government seek deliberately to disempower their opponents by devaluing the very power and integrity of the words they use. In a small way, Localism Watch could help prevent that happening.

Finally, activists saw Localism Watch as a basis for creating a national network of focused support and expertise. The diverse geography of communities and issues across England, and a lack of accessible and reliable advice and information, breeds confusion, isolation and a reluctance to act. That could be changed if activists could easily and quickly link up with others ready to listen, to clarify confront and challenge the barriers and to bring resolution.

Ultimately, the true benefit of Localism Watch would be its ability to bring people together, face to face - sharing knowledge and ideas, separating the reality from the rhetoric, and ultimately, taking localism back to where it truly belongs.

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