

‘Localism Watch’ – a critical watchdog for localism

Why a watchdog?

The Localism Act passed into Law in 2011 with various provisions progressively introduced during 2012. The Act is extensive and complex and is chiefly concerned with the powers of and governance arrangements within local authorities, so-called ‘community rights’, planning, and social housing.

The government’s pitch on the Act is that it purports to ‘shift power from central government back into the hands of individuals, communities and councils’. The Act itself is a specific manifestation of a wider woolly concept that has been peddled by the government – the idea of ‘localism’ as a kind of new dawn of people power and local self sufficiency. In reality, the underlying motivation behind the concept is to open the door to more opportunities for profiteering and exploitation and the underlying motivation of the legislation is to embed government ideologies about economic growth (weakening of planning control for example) and accelerate the existing central policy programme, which is the privatisation of public services (following the policy lead represented by the Open Public Services White Paper). There is justification for critical examination of the Act itself but this needs always to be seen in the context of other initiatives that are packed around it (Enterprise Zones for example) and other changes taking place in local areas and communities.

The Localism Act is relevant to the marketised voluntary sector (at national and local level) in two respects:

- Service-providing agencies are candidates as bidders for and providers of public services. these agencies represent the conflation of ‘private and voluntary’ in the context of privatisation;
- Infrastructure groups in the voluntary sector see themselves as advisers and advocates of the ‘localism agenda’. This work faces in two directions – towards helping service providers win contracts; and towards encouraging (non-service providing) community groups to embrace the apparent benefits brought by the Act. Some of these organisations receive government funding for this work (Locality and Urban Forum for example); more of it is paid for by the Lottery with much the same ‘sales’ intentions and under instruction from the Cabinet Office.

The Localism Act is also very important to the ‘non-marketised’ voluntary and community sector, both activist and non-activist, because the Act does reshape the way some important things are done in local areas. Fighting the damaging provisions of this legislation will fall largely to these brave folk and there may be some provisions of the Act that can be used to advantage in this.

What sort of watchdog?

NCIA is to test out whether it is a good idea to set up a project, (and what it would consist of), that can:

- monitor what is happening as a result of the Localism Act, in itself, and by reference to other 'localism' initiatives, from a critical perspective; and
- provide that information and intelligence to activists involved in maximising the benefits of the Act (where they exist) or fighting its damaging consequences.

The justification for such a 'Localism Watch' project – which needs to be tested – is as follows:

- In itself, the Localism Act is an 'empty pot'. Its precise relevance to local activists will only emerge through the way the Act is applied and the way people in local areas respond.
- The impact of the Act will progressively become apparent through official government guidance to councils and other bodies; the effect of the enabling legislation within the Act; and particularly, official decisions – by central and local government – on specific local proposals and initiatives. This needs to be documented.
- From the activist side (people who are supposedly the beneficiaries of the legislation!), they need to:
 - keep a close watch on what is happening in practice;
 - be able to hold government and state agencies to account;
 - use this growing knowledge to create outcomes that are made and owned by local communities authentically;
 - create a critical analysis of 'localism'

This argues for a place that brings together information on how the Act's various provisions are being used for policy, funding and service decisions across the country; and brings together information about how activists are responding to all this, to help them to respond as successfully as possible.

Localism Watch would enhance our ability to support activism that is radical, independent, ethical, forward-looking and evidence-based. It would also help to develop further local and national networks and alliances.

As far as we can see, no-one else is doing this work a) at all, or b) from a critical or radical starting point. Some activity will be happening with respect to particular issues – neighbourhood planning for example, or community asset acquisition (though most of this will be acquiescent rather than critical) – but there is no monitoring/evaluation of the Act as a whole. .

This work started in April 2013, and we hope to see the results by the beginning of summer 2013. Contact andy@independentaction.net for further information.