

# WHAT NEXT FOR LOCALISM?

 **NALC**

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# Foreword

## **More than anything we must come up with radical new ideas to help hyper local democracy flourish into the future.**

It is my pleasure to provide a short introduction to the third in our series of policy pamphlets, which we are launching at the 2012 political party conferences.

All too often in recent years the debate and narrative around community empowerment, Big Society, localism and the future of local government and public services has overlooked or merely scratched the surface of the role of local (parish and town) councils.

Whilst successive Government's have aimed - successfully in some instances, less so in others - to set out a vision, policy framework and series of tools and levers to develop the potential of our first tier of local government, there tends to be a feeling that more could be done. It is also true that sometimes local councils themselves could react and respond more dynamically to this rapidly changing policy context and to local needs and aspirations.

The National Association of Local Councils is the nationally recognised membership and support organisation representing the interests of around 9,000

local councils and their 80,000 local councillors in England.

We have long supported the notion of devolution and a fundamental shift of power to councils, communities, neighbourhoods and individuals. That's why we so strongly hold the view that empowered local people coming together to take more responsibility for their community through local councils is a tried, tested and trusted model of grassroots neighbourhood action.

Local councils serve electorates ranging from small rural communities to large towns and small cities, are all independently elected and raise a precept (a form of council tax) from the local community. Over 15 million people live in communities served by local councils - about a third of the population - and over 200 new local councils have been created in the last 10 years or so.

The most local level of our democracy works tirelessly to be the voice of and represent the local community, providing services to meet local needs and working to improve quality of life and community well

being. Put simply our sector is full of brilliant people doing brilliant things to make a difference.

Fuelled and driven by what their people and communities want, local councils take social action which makes a real difference. They can achieve outcomes for their respective very local societies - often working closely with principal authorities - in ways that are unique, diverse and effective.

Whether it is helping to run the local library; working with local schools; saving the pub or Post Office; providing leisure, sports and recreation facilities; organising community galas, shows and events; working with and often providing funding to local voluntary groups; coming together with business to support economic development and prosperity; delivering community broadband solutions; local councils at their best are standard bearers for community empowerment and localism in action.

That is why I have been proud to serve them as the chairman of their national body and advocate their interests - and those of communities and people more widely - on a national stage with Government and other organisations.

I've welcomed much of the Government's localism agenda and more latterly their ideas around open public services. The Localism Act provides some very welcome tools for local councils in particular to respond to the

needs of local people, especially the new general power of competence. Long overdue reforms to the way local councils can make payments are also hugely welcome, as are initiatives to provide support and investment at the local level to encourage the take-up of the new community rights and neighbourhood planning .

But we really must start thinking about the future of local councils, and asking what next for localism?

We need to think about whether the current policy, legislative and financial frameworks are right, and what can be done to improve them.

We need to work out what support is needed to really unlock the capacity and potential of local councils - including everyone working in and around them - and what can be done to enhance their delivery capability and productivity.

More than anything we must come up with radical new ideas to help hyper local democracy truly flourish into the future. The Localism Act does not mark the end of our ambitions for local councils, it marks the start of the next phase.

This might mean new powers, reform of old ones, red tape swept away, more investment in some initiatives and less in others, radical changes in practice and procedure, much more innovation and creativity.

That's why I'm delighted to be working with the All Party Parliamentary Group on local democracy and

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it's Chairman Rory Stewart MP to kick start this debate through our 'What next for localism?' inquiry.

We want this discussion to be open, transparent and inclusive. We want to hear from everyone with an interest and passion for local democracy and neighbourhood action, be they involved locally or nationally.

We want to hear your ideas to help shape the future for local councils and help us answer the question: what next for localism.

This publication is intended to kick off that debate with a series of essays from parliamentarians, think-tanks and others sharing their ideas and thinking. I look forward to hearing your ideas too in coming weeks and months.

**Cllr Michael Chater**

Chairman, National Association of Local Councils

*More information on our inquiry can be found on our website at [www.nalc.gov.uk](http://www.nalc.gov.uk), including how to have your say.*

Community

The word "Community" is displayed on a corkboard, where each letter is cut from a different colored strip of paper and held in place by a pushpin. The letters are: 'C' (black on white, red pin), 'O' (white on black, white pin), 'M' (white on yellow, blue pin), 'M' (red on white, blue pin), 'U' (purple on white, red pin), 'N' (blue on yellow, red pin), 'I' (black on white, green pin), 'T' (black on white, yellow pin), and 'Y' (black on white, yellow pin).

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# Parish Councils, growing in importance

## The time is ripe for local councils to play a greater role in shaping and running their communities.

This summer, London got its first parish council in decades when Westminster City Council decided to create the new community council of Queen's Park, following the very strong campaign from local residents there.

Parish councils are living proof that small is beautiful. Civil parishes have their roots in forms of grassroots governance that go back centuries. The practice of neighbours coming together to decide, collectively, how to administer local services and improve their hometown or village, has survived plague, civil war, and industrial revolution – and remains vital to the future of our democracy.

Parishes are traditionally responsible for very local, small-scale services. These might include mowing the town's lawns, planting gardens, maintaining public toilets or providing play facilities for children. But in fact parishes can be the focus for a much bigger debate about a neighbourhood's identity, local people's aspirations, and their hopes for the future. It's natural for people to like that sense of being rooted in and connected to the place they love.

Perhaps that's why we continue to see interest in forming new parishes; not just in rural areas, but urban areas like Queen's Park too.

In fact, what parishes represent – communities making their own choices about their neighbourhood's future;

influence being exercised at a very local level indeed – goes to the heart of the historic transfer of power, from central to local, from bureaucratic control to democratic deliberation, which this Government is seeking to achieve. That is why, as we look to the future, Government is committed to helping parishes, and other forms of neighbourhood democracy, thrive.

The Localism Act received Royal Assent in November 2011. Its provisions bring new powers and new opportunities for town and parish councils.

First, the Act introduces the “general power of competence.” This enables town and parish councils which qualify to use the power the ability to do whatever local people think fit – provided that this does not clash with other laws. This is a change in the default mode, passing the initiative to councils to act in innovative and different ways. What eligible parishes choose to do with that power will be up to them. They might, for instance, decide to invest in community composting, or turn the village pub into a wi-fi hotspot – within the parameters of the law, the only limit is their imagination and ingenuity.

Second, the Act introduces the Community Right to Challenge. Local people, parishes and community groups often have bright ideas of how best to organise very local

services (such as, for example, a “community taxi” to help people who have trouble getting out and about.) In some cases, the council at the next level up, which holds the budget for such services, might be receptive to the idea, and commission the local group or parish. However, local groups’ ability to bid is dependent on the good will of the commissioning body - and those bodies have not always been ready to listen. The Community Right to Challenge enables the local group or parish to put their ideas about how they could run services differently from and better than the council, and, providing their proposals meet the right standard, trigger a tendering exercise so that they have the chance to compete to put their ideas into practice. This is important, because local services often work best when they are designed, managed and delivered at local level to respond to local needs. As the tier of local government closest to their communities, parish and town councils are well placed to know where and how local services can be provided to greater benefits for local people.

Thirdly, it provides the Community Right to Bid. This will allow community groups to stop the clock on the sale of assets of community value, giving them time to get funding and a business plan in place. Many of us have heard stories of groups finding out too late about much loved community assets being sold. Under the right to bid, town and parish councils will be able to nominate assets for listing to their local authority and can also trigger a moratorium of up to six months on the sale of listed assets.

Fourth, and perhaps most radically of all, the Act introduces neighbourhood planning, which empowers communities to come together to produce a neighbourhood plan; a neighbourhood development order or a community right to build order. Under neighbourhood planning, people are able to come together and decide where they want new homes, shops and offices should go; what that new development should look like; and which green spaces they

most want to protect. This is an unprecedented opportunity for very local communities to make the planning system work for them. If successful at independent examination and at a local referendum, the neighbourhood plans have real legal weight whilst the orders automatically grant planning permission for development proposals which comply with the order. This is not mere consultation, but genuine power in the hands of local groups. Parishes are ideally placed to lead the local debate and, where they exist, are the only organisation who have the right to lead their communities in the preparation of a neighbourhood plan. Scores of parishes around the country are already developing neighbourhood plans of their own. I have no doubt that many more will want to seize the chance to articulate and give force to local people’s ambitions.

The time is ripe for local councils to play a greater role in shaping and running their communities. These rights are an important part of our plans to shift power from Whitehall to councils and beyond to communities.

**Brandon Lewis MP**

*Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Department of Communities and Local Government*



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# The devolution of power

**This is all about showing that we can make things fairer and that we can make things better.**

One of the biggest challenges we face is that many people feel that politics is too distant. They think they don't have enough power over their own lives and the places they live in, and that Government is failing to trust them. It's one reason why town and parish councils are so important in bringing power and politics closer to people.

In our time in Government, Labour devolved power to Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and London, and bought in a host of other constitutional reforms. This period was described by Professor Vernon Bogdanor as comparable to the eras of the Great Reform Act 1832 and the Parliament Act 1911 for the mark it left on our constitution.

We also started working on "double devolution" – the task of devolving on to the very local level power that Westminster had itself devolved through the Total Place pilot projects. These brought together a lot of the public funding in an area and locally elected politicians were given the chance to influence how it was spent. But this was, and is, unfinished business.

The Coalition has imposed the biggest cuts in funding on local councils that any of us have seen. Despite David Cameron describing local government as officially the most efficient part of the public sector, the four-year Comprehensive Spending Review Settlement will see an overall reduction in central government grant for councils of 40%, and spending power of around 25% in real terms. This

is a bad deal which tries to devolve responsibility for cuts to local authorities and communities. In addition, the most deprived 10% of upper tier local authorities are having their spending power reduced by four times as much as the least deprived 10%, the Local Government Finance Bill will create uncertainty about councils' future income, and the 10% cut to Council Tax Benefit funding will mean big increases in council tax bills for many people on low incomes.

Meanwhile, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has granted himself 126 new powers under the 'Localism Act', including the power to amend, repeal, revoke or apply any duty on local authorities. He insists on issuing central dictates on rubbish collection and council newspapers, he imposed mayoral referendums on places whether local people wanted them or not, and now he is threatening to remove the power to make planning decisions from local people if the speed and quality of planning decisions is not up to scratch. So much for localism!

The Government has negotiated deals with some cities to devolve powers, building on the achievements of the last Government with the multi-area agreements (MAAs) and city-region deals. I welcome these, but progress has been too narrow and too slow, and it has not extended to other cities and counties. And the biggest problem of all is the absence of a credible plan for jobs and economic growth for a national economy that is now in double-dip recession.

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I think we should have a new “English Deal”, open to all local authorities and not just certain cities, in which there is a decentralisation of power from Whitehall to local communities with councils coming together to make best use of these powers. Rather than the Government poring over a list of approved councils or a map of new boundaries in deciding whom to entrust with greater powers and where, local government should decide how it wants to organise itself for the purpose of taking these on. It could be a city with a mayor, or a city with a leader, or a city region, or a county, or another combination that makes sense locally, including of course working with business.

This Deal should include a clear commitment that local authorities in all parts of England – including towns and parishes – will be given the opportunity to take back power in the interests of the communities they represent. This new deal must include devolution of powers in areas such as transport, housing, skills, and ways of boosting economic development. And rather than trying to control services from Whitehall, the Government should take forward Labour’s Total Place approach - a much more ambitious way of bringing together all the different sources of public finance in a local area. And devolution downwards (eg neighbourhood planning) rather than centralisation upwards (the new plan to hand over local planning powers to the Planning Inspectorate) must also be part of this push to give people the chance to influence decisions where they live.

And why does all this matter? Because one of the best ways in which we can build confidence in politics is for people to see what local government - councils and people - can do in their area to make things better. After all, local government has a great history of doing precisely that, revolutionising the lives of people in the 19th century. And since politics is all about the choices we make, we should recognise that councils are already showing that they are making different choices to protect their communities and ensure fairness.

Many Labour local authorities, from Lambeth to Liverpool, are moving to a cooperative and mutual model, leading the way in putting residents, rather than town hall officials, in charge. Other Labour councils, from Birmingham to Lewisham, are choosing to adopt a living wage. And a recent survey we did showed that many more social homes are being built in areas with Labour authorities.

This is all about showing that we can make things fairer, and that we can make things better. There is a huge well of talent, ability, ideas and passion in every community, and enabling many more decisions to be taken closer to home – a heartfelt cry from the NALC - is the best way to unleash all of these things in the interests of the places we cherish and the people who are our neighbours.

**Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP**

*Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government*



# New financial powers needed

## Financial power should accompany power over planning.

It has historically been the case that opposition parties trumpet the benefits of localism but, when they win elections and get into Government that enthusiasm drains away. The experience of power, so the theory goes, means Governments decide they do not want to give it up after all, diluting their ability to influence and implement policy at every level of the country.

So, as a personal supporter of a more localist agenda for some years, it is with some pride that I see the current Government delivering on its pledges to devolve power down to local authorities, institutions, community groups and residents. And localism is not just about devolving powers and making decision making more inclusive but, in return for greater freedoms and inclusivity, is also key to making local councils and communities more responsible for their own fates and future, driving their local areas forward.

To me, the level of involvement for parish and town councils in the localism agenda is very important. Not only do they have an enhanced role in terms of neighbourhood planning, they serve as a vital link between residents and principal and upper tier authorities, working with local district or county councillors to make sure their small part of the country is not neglected. That such a role is important and respected is perhaps best demonstrated by recent developments in London, where the people of Queen's Park in the City of Westminster have voted to create for their area the first parish council in London since the 1960s. I fully expect more areas currently without a parish council to follow the lead of Queen's Park.

So, the localist agenda is here to stay and is on the right track.

We must not, however, stand still. Where we are on to a good thing we should be constantly looking for ways to refine and improve. And in the case of the localist agenda, I believe that we should be building on the pivotal and representative role of parish and town councils.

Specifically, I believe we need to include them in the New Homes Bonus and Business Rate Retention schemes.

We all know that more development is needed to help deal with the housing shortages faced all over the country. And the New Homes Bonus is designed to ensure that those areas that allow development receive a sum of money for doing so - partly as a 'reward,' which could be spent on new facilities for the local community, but also because there may be consequences of the new development that will need to be ameliorated. Road improvements are perhaps one obvious example. However, the way the scheme is set up at the moment sees the reward given to the principal authorities only. This is justified by the fact it is principal authorities that deliver services directly to local residents and so are in the best position to use the funds.

I disagree with that. I am not talking about the whole of the New Homes Bonus money going to the parish or town council where the development takes place, but simply a slice that will allow improvements to take place in the local area; maybe a play park for local children, maybe the renovation of the parish hall.

But in the age of localism, the key is that the local

This agenda could be moved further by allowing councils to take on board a whole range of new powers, providing they get the support of their communities in a local referendum. This would use local referenda in a pro-active way, not just as a means to block council activities. It would create a framework for autonomy. While developments such as city deals are welcome in the current climate they still represent a form of earned autonomy where it is seen as central government rewarding local government for good behaviour, not as local communities having a right to do things on their own behalf.

We will need to address the problem of finance and not even semi-independent local government can exist relying on central government for most of its funding.

Developments to localise business rates are welcome, but because business rates are now to be used for encouraging business growth by retention and also to even out resources by redistribution, the legislation is so incredibly complex that neither objective is likely to be satisfactorily delivered.

Ultimately there will need to be an element of government grant to even out the large differences in resources and needs between authorities, but there will also need to be greater control over finance at local level if localism is to really happen and the problems of gearing addressed. More financial control at local level could include the complete retention of business rates and the setting of the rate level by councils and even a percentage of income tax being determined at local level as well.

Finally, and extremely importantly, there will need to be a cultural change. We will need to stop ministers believing it is their job to decide how often bins are emptied or by supporting self-appointed free schools undermining and weakening the strategic role of elected local government.

We will need opposition spokespersons not to try and hold ministers to account for things they are not responsible for. We will need the press to understand that ministers cannot be blamed for those things that are really local responsibilities

and we will need the public to understand that while we should all be against post-code lotteries, if different communities properly exercise different choices that will mean things are done differently in different places. We could indeed celebrate this because freeing up local communities and local councils to innovate will itself lead to new ways of working and new service provision which then can be copied elsewhere.

Finally we should not see councils themselves as the ultimate end of the devolutionary process. Double devolution was first championed by David Miliband and it's a principle worth following. Councils must look for new ways of operating, of involving their communities, of creating area budgets, of turning back bench councillors into front line champions, and even accepting that services will be provided differently in different parts of one council's area.

As part of that process, parish, town and other local councils can also have a significant role to play in bringing elected local government even closer to those who receive the services, for ultimately it is service recipients who will benefit, both as customers and as individuals who can help shape the service delivery if decisions are taken at a more local level.

The interesting ideas being pursued at Lambeth, and other cooperative councils, looking to rebalance the influence of consumers and providers, or the efforts I saw recently at Sunderland Council in taking decision making and service delivery closer to the public, are all signs of changes which will help shape a more localist approach throughout the country in the next few years.

### **Clive Betts MP**

*Clive Betts is the Member of Parliament for Sheffield South East. A former Leader of Sheffield Council he was first elected to Parliament in 1992. He served as a Government Whip in the previous Labour Government and was elected the Chairman of the Communities and Local Government Select Committee in June 2010.*

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# What next for devolution?

## The next 10 years offer the most exciting possibilities for the devolution of power to local level.

The next 10 years offer the most exciting possibilities for the devolution of power to local level. At this stage, however, we are only talking about possibilities and there is still much to be done before we can confirm them as realities.

There is no doubt that support for devolution has grown amongst political parties in Westminster. There is cross-party agreement on the general principle if not on the details. It is also true however that talk is still more localist than action. At the same time Local Government Association, the National Association of Local Councils, and individual local councils are becoming increasingly assertive in their demands and their vision.

The devolution of power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the creation of the Mayor of London and the Greater London Assembly have changed the political and constitutional landscape. With the demise of any prospects for elected regional assemblies and a recognition that devolution in England also has to happen, local authorities are the only realistic show in town.

There are still some around, including some ministers who seem to believe devolution can happen around, instead of through, local government, but in the end control over public policy and public finances does need the accountability of elected representatives. We should welcome and encourage volunteers and general community participation but we cannot ultimately rely on the self-appointed to accept ultimate responsibility.

There also has to be a recognition that if we are to allow communities to select different priorities on the one hand and if we are to encourage joint working and joint action on the other, we do need local councils as overseers of local public services and we cannot allow developments such as free schools, police commissioners or separate health commissioning to create silos of service delivery which do not properly relate to wider public needs.

There are four key areas which therefore now need addressing as part of a localised agenda. Firstly local councils need more powers and fewer restrictions. The general power of competence is welcome as a principle but it only allows councillors to do those things that they are not specifically prevented from doing and gives more freedom in the way they deliver things they are required to do. The principle is only as good as existing legislation affecting local government allows.

We can push for more piecemeal legislation ensuring local government is at the heart of devolution and not by-passed by it but the real game changer will be to move on to significant constitutional reform. This agenda is very much being pushed by the Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee which has proposed legislation to legally enshrine the rights of local government to act on behalf of their communities.

This could be reinforced by a joint committee of both Houses of Parliament to ensure that all future individual pieces of legislation are in conformity with this over-arching new constitutional position for local councils.

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communities should be able to decide how best to spend the money and improve their local area. The sums will be minor but to a small Parish Council will be very handy indeed.

To some this may sound like a bribe to try and get local areas to approve more housing, and I suppose in one sense it is. However, it is also more than that. It allows local communities to see a positive in the planning equation where so often all that is seen at the moment is more local housing, and the altering of a village's feel, with nothing in return.

If the New Homes Bonus is designed to get more housing approved, we need local residents to see they will get something positive in return for development. If the principal authorities retain all the New Homes Bonus cash and spend it on their town centres or places relatively distant from the area where the housing will go, there will still be large-scale opposition to new homes.

Similarly if areas with a parish or town council area see business growth, they should be allowed to receive some of the Business Rates to use as they see fit. Again, it need not be much, but even small sums will help small Parishes to help improve their local communities.

Moreover, as we are trying to encourage communities to step in and save local assets – such as local pubs or libraries – surely they would deserve some additional income through the Business Rates Retention Scheme to boost such initiatives.

Of course, there may be some enlightened principal authorities out there that will choose to spend a portion of their New Home Bonus or retained Business Rates on the Parish or Town Council areas that have contributed to growth. However, I believe strongly that, if the principle of localism is to be lived up to, those sums should filter down automatically and the decisions made on how to spend the money be made at a very local level, including the communities in the decision making process.

### **Eric Ollrenshaw OBE MP**

*Eric Ollrenshaw is the member of Parliament for Lancaster and Fleetwood a former teacher he has served as a local councillor a member of a the Metropolitan Police Authority and a Vice-President of the Local Government Association. He was elected to the House of Commons in 2010 and is an active member of the All Party Group on Local Democracy*



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# A new community energy

## **Energetic local communities need the power to raise revenue and take decisions to shape their local area.**

Our Lake District village once seemed to symbolise the inevitable collapse of local communities. A hundred years ago, the parish contained cobblers, black-smiths, millers, and a dozen shops. All have gone. Twenty farms have been replaced by five. Gorse and bracken has invaded good pasture. Two hundred jobs in the quarry have become ten. There are few young families. Perhaps half the houses are second homes, standing empty much of the year. And the school – which had been there for four hundred years – has shut its doors. Local families died out and sold up, ‘off-comers’ moved in, and the names of residents today are now rarely those inscribed on the churchyard headstones.

It is a story repeated ten thousand times across Britain: the culmination of five centuries of destruction of the local. First, the reformation obliterated folk memories and festivals (you can still see the ruined West façade of Shap abbey on the edge of the parish). It continued as the industrial revolution tore millions from their farms, and filled secluded valleys with mines and mills (which have collapsed as suddenly as they emerged). And in the last two decades, we have witnessed

the expansion of large corporations into every crevice of rural life. Shoppers are sucked from the high street shops into the super-markets; from small restaurants and pubs into chains. Small dairy farms have been transformed into giants, milking a thousand cows, 24 hours a day. Our surrounding valleys are drowned in reservoirs, and our hills in Sitka spruce plantations. Large national charities elbow their way into our market towns, absorbing the funds which might have supported smaller and more local charities. And decades of regional development programs have not managed to stop the accelerating concentration of wealth and power in the South-East of England.

But if you see the dozens of heralds in our village lanes marshalling the half-marathon; or turn up at the village hall with seventy others for a lecture, you do not feel the death of community. Of the hundred people in the parish, perhaps eighty run community projects. In the last two years, the village hall has installed its own solar energy scheme – which now funds the hall; the parish council have generated income from a new recycling plant, laying out a new bicycle path, and

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playground; another group has completed a detailed archive based, local history; and yet another has transformed and kept open, in a small white building on the edge of the village, the oldest continuous public lending library in the North-West of England.

Much of this Cumbrian energy exists in other parts of Britain – there will be equivalents of Steve, the pedigree cattle breeder, who constructed the primary school website in Bewcastle; or of Harley, the community support officer, who spent day after day in a single estate in Wigton, listening to families, and in the process reducing anti-social behaviour by seventy per cent. The hundreds of thousands of volunteer hours put into the mountain rescue, the first responders, the Air Ambulance, and the hospice movement, has parallels throughout the country. It is an energy present in large cities, as well as villages.

But in Cumbria, as elsewhere, this is not a simple story. There are fights between people angry at change, and those angry at the failure to change, which can pit half a community against another. Issues of affordable housing, of transport, of fuel poverty, continue to bedevil all rural lives. Farmers struggle with the ideology of Natural England or the national park, dairy farmers struggle with the prices set by processors, villagers struggle to oppose wind-turbine developers. Everyone fights to make the cities, understand the implication of rural isolation for education, for roads, for health. And we ourselves find it difficult to explain or understand such

apparently inevitable decline. On an average income of 16,000 pounds a year Cumbria is not a wealthy area.

But the energy – and increasingly the success of our communities – is remarkable. We have had villages not only saving local pubs, but building 22 house affordable housing schemes; communities not just building cycle paths, but working out how to connect the most remote valleys to super-fast broadband; not only taking over tourist information centres but taking responsibility for planning policy. We have a young dairy farmer, travelling to the Leeward islands, and making connections with fair trade banana farmers. (He has also convinced Cumbrian super-markets to take Cumbrian milk, and organised a major national ministerial conference on the dairy industry). Each of these local initiatives spring from frustration at a lack of common-sense, at the failure of government to deliver. Each community has recognised what needed to be done, how to do it more cheaply and effectively, and has succeeded.

The state must now recognise this success; must respect the knowledge, the skill, the adaptability of living communities; and must get out of the way. Officials should recognise how little they understand about the history and context of particular local communities. The state must learn in the most generous and human sense to delegate: to trust that when local communities are given responsibility, they will treasure it and flourish.

There is, of course, risk to this policy – a few communities

will either do nothing, or launch fantastic, extravagant schemes, some projects will collapse – and when they do, officials and critics will rage at the lack of planning and process, and demand more central control. Money may be wasted, wheels will be reinvented. But ultimately such occasional failures should be tolerated. Local projects are important but not life-threatening – they can affect broadband access but not acute medical care: local failure is rarely fatal. So instead of trying to manage it, ever more closely, through process and regulation, we should allow communities to flourish by removing process and regulation. And we will find that for every failure, local communities will prove a dozen times, that they can deliver a local project more flexibly, more affordably, and more intelligently than any central planner.

Our genius, our human genius, perhaps our British genius, is for local activity. The smaller, particular communities, of which we are part, have always been the source not just of our identity, but also of our success. Our geology is defined by local variety. Visitors from the US or Russia, accustomed to travelling for days through a single terrain, observe how quickly Britain changes from heavy fen to limestone crag, from bleached moorland to bright barley; from houses of yellow Cotswold stone, to brick. This is reflected in a human geology. Programs and initiatives will be as powerful in Perthshire, or Norfolk, or Basildon, but each will have their own local character.

Thus, we must give local communities more power – to

raise revenue, and take decisions; and ensure that they are actually democratic – that the structures are clear, and healthy, which link the representatives to their public. If we can get the new structures right (we could do worse than imitate French elected mayors), we can create something, which is not simply cheaper, or better suited to our areas, but develops those deepest energies and identities, which spring from the communal, the local, and the particular. Britain's future over the next hundred years, will be assured, if it can learn to draw on the varied skills of its seventy million people. Localism is about just this: about liberating our separate and communal energies and imagination.

### **Rory Stewart OBE FRSL MP**

*Rory Stewart is the Member of Parliament for Penrith and the Border in Cumbria. He served in the Army and the Diplomatic Service and as an academic before being elected to Parliament in May 2010. Rory serves as the Chairman of the All Party Group on Local Democracy.*



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# Localism, devolution and the constitution

**We need to empower the localities in any new constitutional settlement to build a web of neighbourhood community and parish councils.**

We are the most highly centralised western democracy and it is essential for our economic and social health that we continue the campaign to drive powers out of Whitehall and into the town hall. However, the process should not stop at substituting a local state for the central one. We need to empower the localities in any new constitutional settlement, to build a web of neighbourhood community and parish councils with stronger powers and independent finances. That's part of the task that will make independence local government work.

The Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee, which I chair, is the newest of all of the Parliamentary Select Committees. As a non-departmental committee we have the luxury of being able to look at the bigger picture, as well as scrutinising specific Government policy within our remit.

In November 2010 the Committee announced an

inquiry to explore the possibility of writing into a formal statutory code the principles and mechanics of the relationship between central and local government in England. The Government's commitment to localism is welcome and laudable, but unless the rights of local government are codified in statute, there is a permanent risk that power will drift back, unnoticed, towards the centre.

In 2009 the Communities and Local Government Select Committee, in their Report Balance of Power, concluded: "The power to govern in England remains too heavily centralised to be efficient or effective. Put simply, the balance of power between central and local government is currently in need of a tilt towards localities". Evidence submitted to my Committee's inquiry suggested that the relationship between central and local government was still unbalanced, and that a previous attempt at regulating the relationship, the 2007

Central Local Concordat, had been a failure.

The 2007 Concordat is a good example of why codification of the rights of local government is necessary. Signed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and the Local Government Association in December 2007, the Concordat was meant to “establish a framework of principles for how central and local government work together to serve the public”. However, there was little or no awareness of the Concordat outside the Department for Communities and Local Government and so it did little to address the imbalance of power.

It has been powerfully argued that only when local government’s right to exist is enshrined in statute will it be able to negotiate equally with central government and be empowered to plan for and invigorate its communities. With this in mind the Committee sought and received a draft code for relations between central and local government to see what appetite, if any, existed for formal codification. The draft code has ten articles. Article one is reproduced below. The full draft code can be found on the committee’s website.

1. The fundamental rights and duties of local councils herein are defined protected and entrenched. They may only be changed by the consent of Parliament as authorised firstly by an elected joint committee of both Houses, and then by the approval of both Houses

of Parliament as prescribed in the amendment to the 1911 Parliament Act [enabling the second chamber to reject changes to the fundamental freedoms of local governance].

In order to raise awareness of the draft code, the Chair of the Local Government Association, Sir Merrick Cockell, and I have been running a campaign for Independent Local Government. We have hosted a series of conversations across the country about our vision for a local government that has financial independence from central government. These events have told me that people want local government to have greater financial control over its own affairs and to be more than the delivery arm of central government. At a time when ordinary people are far more satisfied with their local representatives than with central government, it makes sense that local government should be allowed, in conjunction with local people, to shape local communities.

Over the course of the Committee’s inquiry it has often been said that for codification to mean anything, a settlement would have to guarantee the unfettered right to set a local tax, and the end of capping, including capping of council tax. I applaud the recent city deals initiatives which were announced in July this year. Negotiated by the Cabinet Office and the cities themselves, each of the cities, Greater Birmingham

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and Solihull, Bristol and the West of England, Greater Manchester, Leeds City Region, Liverpool City Region, Nottingham, Newcastle and Sheffield City Region, has their own agreement with central government for taking more responsibility over their own affairs.

I look forward to seeing how initiatives such as the ‘earn back’ scheme—which would allow Greater Manchester to receive a portion of the additional tax revenue if their investment in local infrastructure boosts the local economy—work in practice. These current measures are a step in the right direction, but they fall short of the kind of financial independence that many, including myself, would like to see. This is why I believe that some kind of codified framework for relations between central and local government is necessary.

There are two possible methods of enshrining local government’s right to exist in statute. The first is to codify a framework of relations between central and local government in statute in a similar way to the 1998 Scotland Act. Under the Scotland Act 1998, the Scottish Parliament can make primary and secondary legislation in those areas not reserved to Westminster (which are specified in schedule 5 of the Act) or protected from modification (specified in schedule 4). Devolved subjects are those which do not fall under the reserved categories, or are not otherwise outside the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament. They include:

health, education and training, local government and the police and fire services, among others. The 2012 Scotland Act devolved stamp duty, land tax and landfill tax and limited income tax raising powers.

Or more simply, we could create greater independence for local government at a stroke by amending the 1911 Parliament Act—as suggested in the citation from the draft code above—to ensure that the balance of power between central and local government could only be altered with the consent of both Houses. This would be my preferred option.

These proposals may sound radical to some but they would not seem at all unusual in Europe. The majority of other European countries afford some protection for local government in their respective constitutions, giving local government the right of continued existence. In the United Kingdom there is no such right. The Government, if it so wished, could abolish English local government tomorrow and voters would have to wait until a General Election to voice their displeasure about it. This is not an acceptable state of affairs in a mature democracy. This is exacerbated by the asymmetric nature of devolution in the UK, in which England, which is home to 85% of the UK’s population, is heavily centralised in comparison to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. While opinion polls suggest that there is little appetite for an English Parliament, or a

new tier of English regional government, our cities, our local councillors, town halls and parishes have the knowledge and experience to play a greater role in how our communities are run.

So, what is next for localism? The Spanish model for relations between central and local government is one that I would like to see England adopt eventually. Article 149 of the Spanish Constitution sets out what powers are exclusively the preserve of central government, including criminal law, defence, immigration and macro-economic policy. Article 148 of the Spanish Constitution sets out what powers the 17 autonomous communities (ACs), may, but are not required to, assume. They include health, education, and local government organisation. The residents of these ACs affirmed that they wanted these powers by endorsing the package as a whole via a referendum, and the powers were then detailed in the constitution of each autonomous community. In 2008 Spain's ACs raised approximately 34% of their expenditure from local taxes on property and business, and 21% from sharing revenues on Income Tax and VAT (split equally between the AC and central government), with the remaining expenditure funded through equalisation or conditional grants from central government. I am not saying that the Spanish system is perfect, but it allows local areas and communities the freedom to find local solutions to

local problems, rather than having solutions imposed upon them from the centre.

That can only be a good thing.

### **Graham Allen MP**

*Graham Allen is the Chairman of the Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee and the Labour MP for Nottingham North*



# What is true devolution?

## Devolution to neighbourhoods will be central to future of localism.

You often hear it said that we have too many politicians. That may be true at Westminster but at a neighbourhood level we need more elected representatives.

The passage of the Localism Bill has given councils significant new powers. It has also given greater powers to communities over local assets and services. We should strongly embrace the extra powers conferred and strongly welcome the trend by government to decentralise and devolve.

Where parish or town councils exist, a democratic structure is already in place to give practical leadership to the additional powers now available but whilst rural areas and many towns benefit from such elected structures, most urban areas do not.

We need more elected councillors at a neighbourhood level in these urban areas. The time has come for more urban parishes to be created to give real meaning to democracy at a neighbourhood level.

Otherwise centralisation in town halls will continue as before.

One of the mistakes of county, district and unitary councils is to think that localism will be in place if Whitehall devolves to them. True devolutionists want to devolve power to others and understand the benefits to local democracy of giving neighbourhoods enhanced powers.

County councils are inevitably more distant from their neighbourhoods but surely district and unitary councils should now encourage the formation of elected urban parish councils where parish or town councils do not exist.

The new planning structures being introduced provide an opportunity. Planning decisions require a more robust connection between people and decision-makers. Parish and town councils can provide this because they are elected but panels of nominated

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residents together with referendums are not a fully satisfactory way forward. Elections based on a secret ballot are essential if we are to deliver legitimacy at all stages of the planning process.

It goes further than this. We worry about reducing turnout in local elections particularly of young people. One way of addressing this is to elect more people to make decisions at a neighbourhood level.

I was a councillor in Newcastle upon Tyne for 35 years. During this time I experienced the aftermath of the abolition of my urban district council and various attempts by the city council to establish area committees and ward committees usually with too few powers not least over budgets. There was certainly a change during our period of leadership in that the council began to consult better and devolve more particularly around budgets - in some cases through participatory budgeting - but with so many statutory powers remaining with officers or cabinet members it has proved in practice no more than a half-way house.

My own ward (Parklands) is an example of the opportunity. Located in the north of the city it has a parish council covering half of it. Created in 1974 as a successor body to a rural district council it has been a huge success in delivering very local services to around two thousand people. Now, a new estate built to its north but inside the parish boundary has

doubled the size of the parish council and added new sets of responsibilities. Meanwhile the southern end of Parklands ward with some 3500 residents has no parish council at all.

It all works in one sense because parish councillors and city councillors work closely together and residents' groups mostly cover the non-parished areas. It does, however, feel incomplete.

It would be so much better if the whole ward had a parish structure. More people could be involved in making decisions rather than just attending consultative meetings or ward meetings where only the three city councillors can vote. More people would understand why difficult decisions sometimes have to be made. More people would engage with the realities of prioritisation. More people would be deciding on levels of spending and how to raise the cash. The blame culture that pervades local government would reduce and more people would actively be seeking solutions to the problems of their neighbourhoods. And it would be done on the basis of a ballot box that strengthens representation and accountability.

So much of public service delivery these days is undertaken by 'little platoons'. This is because, for many in Whitehall and Westminster, localism means establishing small groups to get on with things in their areas accountable ultimately to Whitehall departments.

Hence, school governing bodies, academies, GP commissioning, health trusts, skills and training are all spending very large sums of public money but are not rooted in publicly accountable structures in neighbourhoods. Councillors may think geographically about services in their areas but they lack the powers to hold service providers fully to account. Community safety is often an exception to this general rule because great efforts have been made by police and councils to engage neighbourhoods in discussing their problems and priorities. Even so, these are still only consultative in nature.

Now that the Localism Act is in place and now that the government has clearly demonstrated its commitment to further decentralisation, it is vitally important that local councils demonstrate that they are up to the challenge. I really want them to make a success of their enhanced role but, for this to happen, they really must work harder to devolve more to their neighbourhoods and enable them to have greater scrutiny over public service delivery.

### **Lord Shipley of Gosforth OBE**

*John Shipley is a Liberal Democrat Newcastle City Councillor and served as leader from 2006-2010. He was given a peerage in 2010. In 2011 he was appointed as an adviser to the Coalition Government on cities policy.*



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# What next for the Localism Agenda in London?

**At its heart lies the belief that communities and neighbourhoods must be empowered.**

The public sector is undergoing a profound change, creating a period of uncertainty and flux but also one of great opportunity. With this comes the potential to reshape public services and, more fundamentally, to rethink the relationship between the state and the citizen.

Over the past two decades councils were stifled in their ability to deliver and shape local services. This has changed now. Under the Localism Act we have seen a government more willing to release – albeit gradually and slowly – some of the strictures in which local government has been operating.

It is therefore local government which is at the forefront of these changes, and which has the means to become the central player or guarantor of domestic public services.

To achieve this, we must recognise this changing

environment and respond accordingly. In Westminster we see the opportunities created through greater civic involvement and participation, which includes looking at different types of governance.

Following the successful application by Queen's Park residents to establish a Community Council, we are working with their representatives to ascertain the powers and operations of the new Community Council to deliver on local priorities, in advance of it being formally established in March 2014 – London's first in more than 50 years.

We are also considering applications to designate a 'neighbourhood area' as the forerunner of establishing Neighbourhood Forums which will seek to further the social, economic and environmental well-being of individuals within their neighbourhood area.

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We want to create new kinds of public services and financing through community-driven mutuals, and by forging new relationships between local government and the private sector through social impact bonds. City deals and community budgets are new tools that can be used; we will test ideas like these out in local pilots over the coming months.

These moves are a huge step on the path towards redefining the relationship between the state at the local level and the citizen, so that local people and local communities have much greater control and say over services in their neighbourhoods. It will also allow local government to address some of the more fundamental challenges we face including homelessness, dependency and worklessness.

By acting as the honest broker, local government has the ability to bring services together. Of course, there will be different solutions, different ideas and ultimately different service models to tackle different issues in different parts of the country.

This is the beauty of localism. At its heart lies the belief that communities and neighbourhoods must be empowered to decide and choose and play an active part in the running and delivery of the services that affect them.

### **Cllr Philippa Roe**

*Philippa Roe has been a Westminster City Councillor since 2006. She served as Cabinet Member for Housing and Cabinet member for Strategic Finance before being elected as the leader of the Council in 2012. As leader she has supported the establishment of the first parish council in London for over 40 years in the Queens Park area of the City*



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# Big Thinking in Small Places

**The Queen's Park experience provides a cutting-edge context for localism.**

Paddington residents in north Westminster, inner London, have spent the last ten years developing home-grown capacity to take on the social and economic regeneration of neighbourhoods within the area. They have been supported in this by Paddington Development Trust – one of the country's most successful community-based social enterprises. The Trust works for the long-term social rehabilitation of an otherwise marginalized part of central London, where people have for too long been consigned to sink estates with little thought given to their fate beyond the 'anti-social' impact they may have on the rest of society.

Together local people supported by the Trust have campaigned and won the right to establish a Queen's Park Community Council, also known as a parish Council, with powers derived from the 2007 Local Government Act.

People here don't want hand-outs; they don't want funny-money schemes that need bending to a British rather than third-world context; they don't want charity

to determine their future role in society. People here want the right to determine the quality of local life and, as ordinary citizens, to be proud to stand on their own two feet.

The Queen's Park experience provides a cutting-edge context for localism and its link to social and civic reform through democratic representation and acquisition of local governance powers. Spearheaded by local people with fantastic support from NALC, Queen's Park is embarking upon a micro civic revolution – the model they develop may well be a harbinger of things to come elsewhere and offers a blueprint for diverse inner city communities up and down the country to seize the initiative.

The evolution of contemporary localism has been determined by an over-riding stop-start-stop dynamic. Through various funding streams: taskforces, City Challenges, Single Regeneration Budgets, Local Area Agreements, Neighbourhood Renewal, to name but a few, a 'neighbourhood' model has evolved that rests on

the commitment and capacity of local neighbourhoods, wards and parishes, some poorer than others, to do it themselves.

Schemes are changed every four or five years creating confusion and some chaos in community sectors which have been pursuing local policies that build quite logically on successful examples of added value at lower costs. Billions have been spent on social and capital projects in around 90 failing areas in England.

These same places have failed decade after decade and while the built environment is a critical element of urban regeneration, the key to future prosperity lies in the hands of people living within these parishes and islands of constant deprivation, not capital programmes per se nor a falsely entitled public bureaucracy that is often far removed from the reality of neighbourhood life.

Concepts of localism have been continuously reinvented since its collapse in the course of the industrial revolution and subsequent growth of high profit global supply chains. Regeneration and socio-economic policy has singularly failed to recognise the value of local human capital and investment, most of which lies in the domain of the public sector procurement regimes. The money flow is erratic, wasteful and has lacked continuity in strategic objectives geared to local empowerment and the reduction in poverty.

As local authorities contract and increasingly centralize services, parish councils are one model that can help fill the void. But empowering a community to take control depends largely on its own capacity to do so. In the most deprived neighbourhoods in the country support is often needed, and the most enterprising area-based regeneration schemes have pursued the establishment of parishes as a means to sustain local voice and control – Bradford and Paddington most notably.

Derivative parish powers crucially involve money and the use of available powers to shape their area - through local taxation as well as the application of new and emerging neighbourhood planning powers traditionally held in the domain of local authorities. The new general power of competence frees local authorities (parish councils included) to cut through much of the red tape that has shaped and hindered them in the past. Through the application of accountable systems of governance and fiscal transparency we can ensure that basic values are upheld and that participative democracy is active in our local lives.

Localism provides the context by which we can reform local government through redistributive and progressive reform of taxation and parish and neighbourhood planning. This is not an easy process as many of us will acknowledge. The many attempts to

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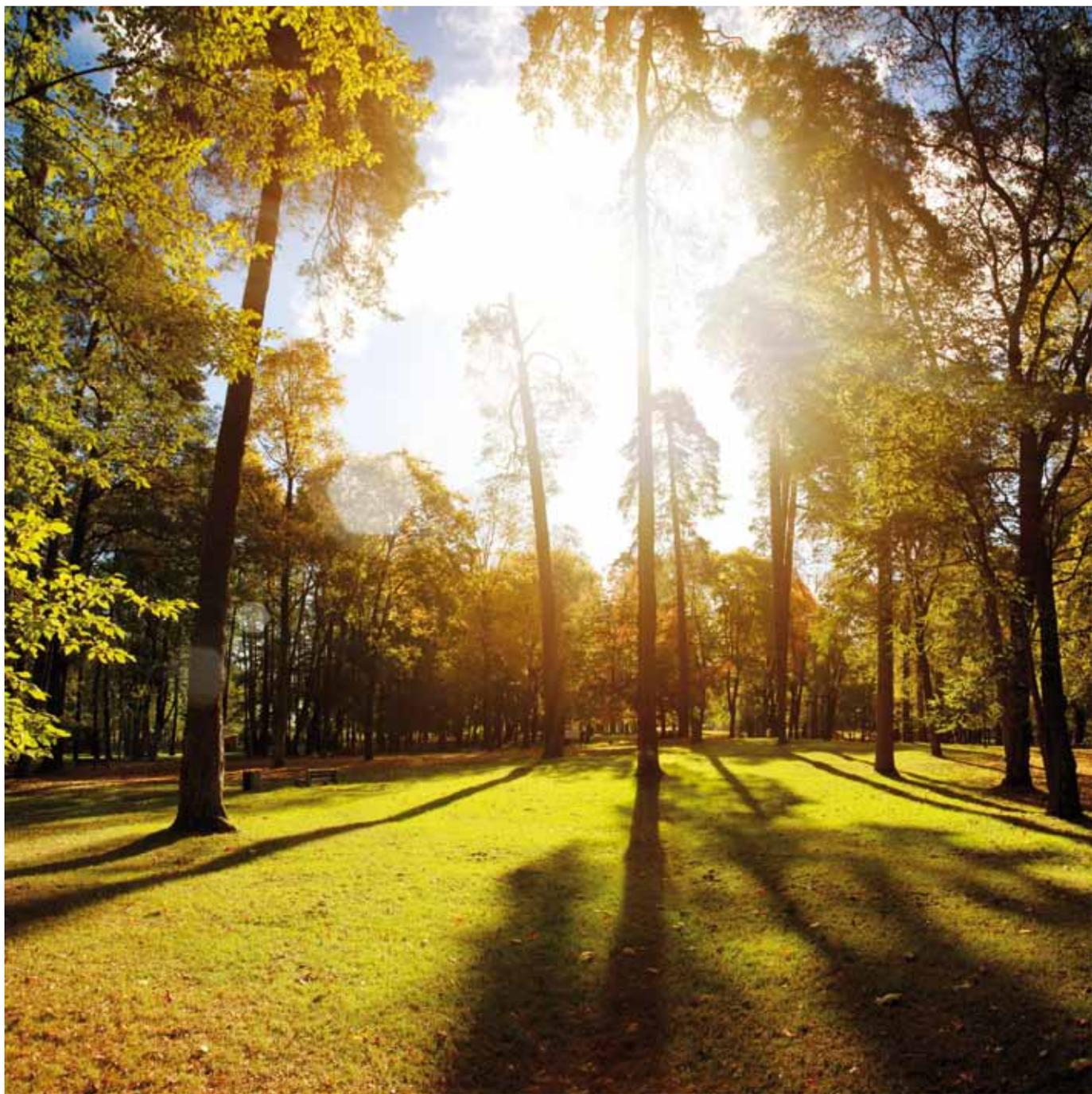
date to loosen the centrist grip on the country have been repeatedly thwarted and England remains one of most centralized states in Europe. For the first time perhaps there is not a single party who believes that the status quo can endure.

Parish and community councils represent a slender chance to change from the bottom up. They provide an opportunity to shift aspects of fiscal power from a politically defined establishment to a non-political civil society where local people identify local priorities and agree to pay for them through a participatory democratic system operating on the streets of where we live.

If the parish movement is to adapt to the times we need to raise our civic voice and recognize that democracy comes hand in hand with fiscal power. We must take responsibility for the distribution of our money and not hand it over willy-nilly to those who labour in the mistaken belief that it is their money which they can spend as befits their outmoded and failing political ideologies.

### **Neil Johnston**

*Neil Johnston is the CEO of the Paddington Development Trust a social Enterprise working for citizens and community enterprises engaged in economic, environmental, and social regeneration and reform in four wards in the Paddington Area of Westminster. The Trust is committed to supporting the Parish Council model to provide for the 21st Century needs of diverse inner urban communities. 2014 will see the election of London's 1st Parish Council in the Queen's Park ward in Westminster.*



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# Radical localism

**Radical localism requires a new relationship between local authorities and communities as well as local and central government.**

The Localism Act arrived to much fanfare last year. Promoted as the "biggest transfer of power in a generation", it certainly represented a clear statement of intent from the current government of its plans to devolve power to local communities. And given the realities of public policy, where things often seem to move at the speed of tectonic plates, many local authorities and community groups found the contents of the Act to be pleasingly empowering. But not, a year on, we are rightly asking 'what next?' The fact remains that Britain is still one of the most centralised states (if not the most centralised state) in Europe, so there is plenty more work to be done.

One question to ask is whether devolution is too often stopping at the top two tiers of local government. Organisations – in this case councils – are sometimes guilty of spending a little too time arguing for greater powers and responsibilities to be devolved to them,

without taking the next step of thinking what should be devolved beneath them. That said, there are plenty of examples of local authorities engaging in the drive for wider devolution with a genuine 'can-do' attitude. For example, Birmingham City Council has been working on community asset transfers for a number of years, while Barnet Council has implemented an 'adopt-a-street' pledgebank approach to enabling communities to improve the quality of their neighbourhoods.

Another good example is the Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead (RBWM), who recently launched a menu of devolved services that local parish councils can pick and choose from as they see fit. In this menu RBWM has spelled out in clear and simple terms the services that parishes can take on, including costs and optional extras. This community friendly approach has merits – if empowerment at the neighbourhood level is to be a reality on the ground, local authorities will

have to be proactive in their support for communities, while open and clear in their language and guidance. Many local authorities have known this for years of course, but there is a major communications and facilitation role for local authorities in the coming decade if the provisions in the Localism Act are to be fruitfully used.

But, important though it is, the Localism Act is not the only influence on this agenda. The economic realities the country faces are harsh ones, and the impact on public services will be profound. Put simply, there just isn't going to be enough money to allow things to continue as they are. And, as we argue in our latest report, which was launched last month by Oliver Letwin and Sir Merrick Cockell, the result will be that in coming years there will be a fundamental shift in the relationship between local authorities and the communities they serve, which will change how people view their public services.

Firstly, citizens and communities will need to come to terms with a different operating environment for local public service delivery, whereby they engage not just with local authorities and councillors, but all sorts of service delivery organisations from private sector organisations, to voluntary groups, and staff mutuals. A myriad of solutions across a whole range of service areas are likely to propagate in response to medium-term

fiscal and innovation challenge, and this will take time for service recipients to adapt to.

Secondly, citizens and communities will have to adapt and change the nature of their relationship with the council, becoming more active participants in determining what the service priorities are for a given area. Local authorities must take a lead in forging this new relationship, fostering a mature dialogue with their local communities to get a more accurate picture of local needs, while articulating and explaining the difficult decisions that will have to be made and the additional responsibilities and levels of involvement that local people will have to assume.

However, there are barriers that will test this 'new relationship'. Internal barriers in local authorities, such as an often muted appetite for enterprise and risk, opposition to non-traditional models of service delivery, and employee reluctance to grasp new models of ownership could prevent the full possibilities of 'doing things differently' being realised.

And there are external barriers too, with a key culprit being European Union procurement legislation – a bogeyman for local authority procurement teams and potential providers alike. But the good news is that the EU is currently consulting on how to reform the relevant directives to make them simpler, less administratively burdensome, and more flexible. We believe this

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window of opportunity offers a golden chance for the Government to make the case in the brasseries of Brussels for a fundamental reshaping of these directives.

Unless hearts and minds are won over to a different service delivery environment, combined with a simpler and easier framework for testing and agreeing new forms of service delivery, the necessary transfers of power may prove too challenging. The positive aspect in all of this is that most of the players in this all want the same thing; devolution has never been so popular a policy direction. However, there's a long way to go before Britain sees truly radical localism in action.

### **Alex Thomson**

*Alex Thomson is the Chief Executive of the independent think-tank Localis, which is dedicated to issues related to local government and localism. Prior to joining Localis in August 2010, Alex was the Conservative Party's specialist policy adviser for decentralisation and local government.*

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# Pop up parishes

## Pop up parishes could be the solution to delivering local level decision making in London

The growth of a more connected globalised world has perhaps paradoxically led to an increased political focus on localism. At the last General Election all three main political parties promised action on localism to give people more of a say at what happens within their local area.

This political focus on localism has followed polling and other surveys which have shown that people attach great importance to the quality of their local neighbourhoods. Both the physical state of their local area and the strength of its social and community infrastructure are seen as important, but surveys show that people are often relatively dissatisfied with what they offer and the way they work.

The quality of the local environment has a direct impact on quality of life. People want safe parks and streets, local community services and amenities, and stronger ties between neighbours. The problem is that central Government might promise action to deliver this, but it is far too distant to be

able to effectively influence local outcomes and even local government can feel too remote and not joined-up enough to deliver these.

Delivering at the local level needs partnership not just between central and local Government, or in London regional government through the Mayor and the boroughs, but the local neighbourhood level has an important role to play too.

At the Centre for London we argue that both the Mayor and the London councils should work with central government to encourage the creation of Community Improvement Districts or 'Pop-up Parishes' – temporary super-local enterprises with a remit to tackle specific local problems or make concrete improvements. The idea of Community Improvement Districts in London has been developed strongly by a recent report, *Engaging Londons Communities*, by the London School of Economics, the City of London Corporation and London Councils, and given support by the Cabinet Office

Minister Francis Maude.

The report looked at the challenges and opportunities faced by London's communities stemming from the Coalition's priorities of localism and the development of the Big Society. The report highlighted that whilst there was some support for community level action there seemed to be no groundswell of enthusiasm from communities to 'join up and take part'. Similarly whilst there was pragmatism from local authorities to use the voluntary and community sector to deliver services the fragmented nature of the sector would make it difficult for it to take on significant amounts of service delivery. The last government introduced legislation that allowed for the creation of formal Parish Councils in London, though with the exception of a small number of areas such as Queens Park in Westminster, Londoners have shown little interest in creating a new permanent level of local government, perhaps because London already has two levels of local government (boroughs and the GLA). Creating a third permanent layer can often, to local residents at least, feel like a bureaucratic step too far.

A recent report by the London School of Economics (LSE) suggested that the development of Community Improvement Districts or Pop-up Parishes, based on the successful development of Business Improvement Districts, could provide an answer.

The attraction of Pop-up Parishes is they would be both temporary and super-local. They would provide a structure through which to deliver local community initiatives and

service provision without having to go through the process of establishing a full parish council.

Pop-up parishes – which have also been championed by Tony Travers at the LSE and practised informally by the London Community Foundation in Lambeth - could have the power to raise a modest local levy, but only where the majority of the local community had voted in favour of the levy, and agreed on how it should be used. Pop-up Parishes would have a limited lifespan – say four years – though if a parish proved popular and the local community wanted it to continue, they could vote for its renewal.

Pop-up Parishes could offer a light-touch, flexible, responsive way of empowering London's local communities and revitalising local neighbourhood life.

### **Ben Rogers**

*Ben is the director of the Centre for London at the think tank Demos. As a policy thinker and writer he has a particular focus on cities, citizenship, social capital, public service reform, and the built environment. He has led strategy teams in Haringey Council, DCLG and The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit.*

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