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Perspectives on the Localism Act - Planning for People or Centralisation of the System?

The Localism Act was intended to shift decision making powers into the hands of individuals, communities and councils. For some it was seen as a Government response to rural parishes and shire counties opposing urban sprawl and top-down housing targets. For others it's opened up new initiatives and experimentation such as neighbourhood planning. Nineteen months on; what's happened and where next for Localism? Jessica Sellick investigates.



[‘The Planners’](#), a recent BBC documentary series, follows the work of local planning officers across the UK. Each programme allows viewers to follow real planning applications, to see the contentious processes behind them and the local authority

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officers and councillors who are often stuck in the middle between developers and community members. With the overarching narrative of 'Britain is a green and pleasant land but for how long?', each programme looks at a range of planning applications and disputes – from a proposal to build wind turbines in the Stroud Vale to villagers objecting to a proposal to build a crematorium outside their village in Cheshire; and from an application to erect a chicken shed in the Scottish Borders to Chester Zoo requesting permission for a £30 million island project.

For me, 'The Planners' illuminates how the government aspiration to boost growth and housing development can seem at odds with the desire of local communities. For on our television screens we see how people's dreams are realised or come crashing down around them and how battle lines are drawn, with local people fighting for or against what they deem to be suitable or unsuitable developments in the countryside.

Back in 2011, it was the passing of the Localism Act which introduced new powers to give people more control over such developments in their local area. Under the Act, the Government:

- Presented communities with the power to set the priorities for local development through [neighbourhood planning](#);
- Required local planning authorities to draw up clear, up-to-date [Local Plans](#) that conform with the [National Planning Policy Framework](#), meet local development needs and reflect local people's views of how they wish their area to develop;
- Provided councils with the power to raise money to support local infrastructure through the [community infrastructure levy](#); and
- Assigned councils new powers to stop unwanted development on gardens (so-called 'garden grabbing').

Since then, a range of discussions have opened up around the time, money and goodwill needed to make some of the powers work; the wider impact of these measures on surrounding landscapes and settlements); which comes first – community led proposals or the Local Plan?; where do architectural/design decisions fit?

More recently, in May 2013, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) published a report showcasing the experiences of neighbourhood planning ['frontrunner' projects](#) in rural areas. The report contains tips for local communities

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that are considering producing neighbourhood plans: 'is a neighbourhood plan right for you? What are you trying to achieve? Is it enough to be in general conformity with the local plan?' alongside seven case studies: from allowing modest development in small villages (Upper Eden); to restricting the use of new housing as holiday homes (Lynton and Lynmouth); and how parishes can work together (Fosse villages).

With anxiety surrounding whether more is being claimed for legislative reform than is actually being delivered – who is in the driving seat of localism and planning? - it is worth remembering that Neighbourhood Planning is still in its infancy. The extent to which it allows local people to have a say in the place where they live and work has yet to be fully worked through. Indeed, to support interested communities, [grants](#) of up to £7,000 have been made available through the 'Supporting Communities in Neighbourhood Planning Programme'. This 2-year Programme (2013-2015) with £9.5 million from DCLG is being delivered by Locality in partnership with the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), Community Development Foundation, Urban Vision Enterprise, Eden Project and URS.

Similarly, the National Planning Policy Framework ([NPPF](#)) published in March 2012, sets out the Government's view of what sustainable development means and measures to speed up planning decisions. According to the NPPF: "Sustainable means ensuring that better lives for ourselves don't mean worse lives for future generations. Development means growth" (page i). Intended to reflect people-led planning, the NPPF is based on Local Plans that the Government has described as "produced by communities" and the "keystone of the planning system". Yet [research](#) carried out by the LGiU and the National Trust has found the NPPF is undermining localism. They cite examples where the Planning Inspectorate, through the examination process, is prioritising development over the views of local people. The research identifies two practical issues that could be mitigated to help give people more say over sustainable economic growth: (1) greater recognition of the issues around land-banking which led sites to be excluded from local authority housing supply on the basis that they are currently considered economically unviable for development; and (2) providing additional time to adopt Local Plans to help ease the pressure on planning departments. In practice, there is an ongoing debate around Greenfield versus Brownfield development – with CPRE's '[Countryside Promises, Planning Realities](#)' describing developments in sensitive locations amid a [warning](#) from the Planning Minister, Nick Boles, that not all the housing the country needs can be on Brownfield land and "in some places this may mean building on low quality, environmentally uninteresting fields. In exceptional circumstances, it may involve a Green Belt review".

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The Community Infrastructure Levy ([CIL](#)) is the levy that local authorities in England and Wales can choose to charge on new developments in their area. The charge applies to most new buildings (depending upon size and type of development) with the money generated used to support development that the council, local community and neighbourhoods want (e.g. road schemes, park improvements, a new health centre). CIL came into force in April 2010 with amendments coming into force between then and April 2013; and the Government consulting on further reforms (with the consultation closed on 28 May 2013). On the one hand, CIL is intended to give communities the flexibility and freedom to set their own priorities and deliver infrastructure projects; on the other hand, the extent to which it addresses the housing crisis by simplifying the conditions attached to planning applications is questioned, with some developers arguing that local tariffs are over-inflated and allowing some councils to prevent house building in their area.

Taken as a collective, the Localism Act – with Neighbourhood Planning, the NPPF and CIL - and how it meets the needs and aspirations of rural communities is up for deliberation. For too long many rural areas have been caught in what has been termed the “sustainability trap”: deemed unsustainable because they lack services and facilities and have limited transport accessibility. This has denied rural places the ability to provide new homes and jobs which might help sustain their services, facilities and local shops. So, will the powers under the Localism Act tackle the supply of housing in rural areas, especially amid the impact of welfare reform and the ‘bedroom tax’ for under-occupancy (there can be very few 1 or 2 bedroom houses/flats in rural places)? Will the powers confront ‘affordability’ especially when house prices in villages and hamlets are increasing more so than in urban places? Will the powers encourage local employment and business creation in rural places – and tackle in-work poverty?

In his introduction to [‘Living Working Countryside’](#), Matthew Taylor described how “this country’s rural communities cannot stand still. Change is inevitable whether development takes place or not, and the choices we make today will shape tomorrow’s character of the market towns, villages and hamlets that make up our countryside”. Following Taylor’s lead, ‘has the planning process become an engine of regeneration’ or do we face a future of decline?’ To respond to this question, and issues raised in this piece, the RSN is holding an event on ‘localism and planning’ on 16 July 2013 at Shirehall, Shropshire Council. The event will include presentations from Gordon Hunter (Lincolnshire Community Foundation) on “the gracelands approach to community development – a little less conversation” and Clive Keble (independent consultant) with ‘news from the hood –parish councils and neighbourhood planning’. Michael Hyatt (from Shropshire Council) will offer a local authority perspective and Trevor Cherrett (from the Town and Country planning

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Association) will reflect on 'now and where next' for community planning. For more information and to book your place at this free event please contact Richard Inman by email richard.inman@sparse.gov.uk or telephone 01822 813693.

Jessica is a researcher/project manager at Rose Regeneration; an economic development business working with communities, Government and business to help them achieve their full potential. She is currently providing Defra with examples of where 'Big Society' initiatives are working well and undertaking Leader programme evaluations in Cumbria. Jessica recently completed a piece of research for Oxfam on [farm poverty](#), a [National Review of Leader](#) for Defra and prepared a [Rural Economy Planning Toolkit](#) for Leicestershire Rural Partnership. Jessica can be contacted by email jessica.sellick@roseregeneration.co.uk or telephone 01522 521211. Website: <http://www.roseregeneration.co.uk/>

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