

Voluntary and Community Sector Forum

Localism briefing, Balham, 10 May 2011

Nick Burkitt from the Department of Communities and Local Government gave an overview of recent developments regarding the Localism Bill and the Big Society. According to the government,

Big Society represents a culture change, aiming to give individuals and local areas more control as well as responsibility.

This is not a new idea and the intention is to build on existing voluntary action to encourage more volunteering, more local involvement in planning and decision making and more community empowerment.

The Localism Bill is a key tool to making this happen. Important policy changes in the relationship between central and local government include the removal of various targets and monitoring regimes, such as Local Area Agreements. Local areas will be left to determine their own priorities.

For communities, the Localism Bill presents several potential opportunities to get involved and have more influence (entering into force in April 2012).

Right to buy

This aspect of the bill gives communities the right to take over local assets (public or private) that may be under threat of closing down at a lower price than the asset would fetch on the open market.

Local people will be able to register interest in a building and will be given a six month period to enable them to raise funds if the asset were to be put up for sale.

The government is planning on attaching advice and finance solutions to this new power.

Right to challenge

The right to challenge is intended to give local people the opportunity to bid for a local service that is not already contracted out, if they feel they could do a better job of providing/running it. If the challenge is successful, normal tender processes apply.

Simplifying processes

As a general approach to improving the way government works with other sectors, central government would like to open up key public processes to voluntary organisations and small businesses by helping to unpick and simplify them, including procurement, planning and permits.

Questions and Answers

What influence can residents have over local planning processes and how would this happen?

It will be possible for people in a local area to create their own 'Neighbourhood Plan' that essentially outlines what they want for their area. The Neighbourhood Plan can cover an area up to ward level in size.

Can local businesses influence or determine the outcome of Neighbourhood Plans?

Local business should be part of the planning process, but the plan as a whole needs to be approved by local residents (by voting).

How are residents going to be involved? If this is going to be a democratic process, consultation has to go beyond sending a letter or email.

The Plans will have referendums attached and there will be money available to undertake consultation.

How will the government support the voluntary and community sector to do more for less? Skills, time, money?

There is less money around for everyone. There will be no more big programmes once the Transition Fund has come to an end.

Without any support, many charities could go out of business or get swallowed up by larger organisations. What will you/we do when we can't cut back any more?

There will be a shake up. The Transition Fund is aimed at medium sized charities in the short term and there is a definite risk that some organisations will not be around.

How will businesses and private individuals be encouraged to support charities?

There will be a ['Giving White Paper'](#) in the coming weeks that will outline plans and strategies. Lord Wei, the government's Big Society adviser, is involved.

How will the Big Society bank work?

The bank will get £200 million from high street banks and £60 million from dormant bank accounts. It will provide loan finance, not grants.

Apart from Neighbourhood Plans, what will more power and control for local people mean?

Initiatives like Community Budgets will be important mechanisms for local involvement. Pilots are currently underway across the country. More generally, Local Authorities will have a key role in making this happen. Localism is the ethos – doing things at the most local level. A key role for voluntary sector organisations will be representation and voice.

There is a need for better local news. Brightside (the Council's paper) is the only publication that reaches all homes.

This is a priority area for government, looking at local papers and getting key local information out there.

Action points

Volunteering and the government's work programme

Under a new scheme in place to tackle unemployment, the government has contracted a number of agencies (SEETEC is the provider for London) to develop 30-day, full-time volunteering placements for people who are in receipt of Job Seekers Allowance. Referral is done via the JobCentre. Andrew Smith (Lifetimes) is meeting with SEETEC to find out the details of this scheme and if there are any incentives for local organisations to engage and provide placements (any information will be published on www.wvsda.org.uk)

Working more strategically together

How can we come together as a sector to talk more strategically about current issues and attempt to tackle them jointly? There are area based forums in the borough – Roehampton, Battersea as well as Balham and Tooting – along with thematically connected groups like the Learning Disabilities provider forum.

Wandsworth Community Fund

Thames Community Foundation are running a new funding scheme. More details requested.

Local representation on Council committees and bodies?

At the last forum, the question was raised whether local people could be involved in some more direct way in the Council's work, e.g. by sending a representative to the committee that will assess applications to the Big Society Fund. Mike Brook from the Council's Economic Development Office responded that he had raised this with the Council but that there had not been a response.

Suggestions for future forums

- Wandsworth Challenge
- Joint response to the cuts
- Health and Wellbeing board
- Group work

List of participants

Yassin Ali	Somali Community Advancement Organisation
Kate Allan	Balham and Tooting Community Association
Mike Brook	Economic Development Office
Manuel Button	Wandsworth Community Transport
Joanne Daley	Women Arise Ministries
Naida Haq	Catch22
Howard Hills	(formerly CareLine)
John Horrocks	The Putney Society
Syeda Islam	WOW Mums
Tama Khalk	Pohwer Icas
Jan Lemmon	Southside Partnership
Jo Lofgren	Lifetimes
Julie Mallett	Wandsworth Against Cuts
Emma Marks	Extended Schools - Battersea Cluster
Annie McDowall	Share Community
Nesh Naicker	Careers Development Group
Ben O'Donnell	Princes Trust
Sue Osborne	Alzheimers Society
M. Poulter	The Putney Society
Sarah Rackham	Katherine Low settlement
Andrew Smith	Lifetimes
Wendy Speck	Councillor
Edward Thompson	Life Tabernacle
Caroline Whitehead	Wandsworth Museum
Pamela Wright	Wandsworth Citizens Advice Bureaux

Contact:

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