



The Localism Bill Seminar notes.

Opportunities, concerns and how proposals might work in practice.

*Friday 25th March 2:00 – 4:30pm
at the New Horizon Youth Centre.*

Synopsis

The seminar aimed to raise understanding and awareness about the Localism Bill, hear different perspectives on the proposals, and discuss points of interest. As the Bill is still in its parliamentary stages and has not yet received Royal Assent, it was made clear that speakers could only give their perspectives on it, and it might not be possible to answer some questions at this stage.

Welcome & Introductions

Donna Turnbull welcomed all delegates and introduced panel members to the audience.

Speaker Presentations

1. Councillor Sarah Hayward

‘Localism: the Coalition Government’s vision for Big Society’

- Camden has an active Voluntary and Community Sector with approximately 2,500 known organisations operating in the borough with high levels of community involvement in volunteering.
- The amount London Borough of Camden spends on the Voluntary and Community Sector in Camden is one of the highest amounts spent by any council in the country.

- The Big Society team sits within the Office for Civil Society, and more specifically within the Department of Communities and Local Government.
- Since the election the concept of Big Society is more substantial and now pervades every area of public service delivery.
- Government claims the Localism Bill will remove barriers to local service delivery.
- The Right to Build is seen as a contentious point as different areas in a locality have different needs which may conflict.
- The Council now face the challenge to continue to support a vibrant VCS in a changing funding and policy environment.
- It is hoped the Localism Bill will make it easier to mitigate the impact of cuts by working strategically with business and private individuals and encouraging partnering and co-production.

2. Simone Hensby

‘Localism: Collaborative & Strategic working in the Voluntary and Community Sector’

- The Voluntary and Community Sector is strongly committed to community empowerment and a ‘bottom-up’ approach.
- A strategic shift of power from central to local government down to voluntary and community organisations poses questions over scrutiny and accountability.

Right to buy

- Voluntary and community organisations are in a difficult position financially to buy property.
- Organisations don’t necessarily have available funds or equity.
- A breathing period or moratorium would be useful for organisations to build funds for purchase but would require realistic time-scales to work effectively.

Right to provide

- “Mutuals” are seen as part of civil society. This demonstrates a link between localism and commissioning.
- If councils are looking for employees to set-up mutuals and deliver services, then they need to collaborate with the voluntary and community sector. Are the council looking at this option?

Right to Challenge (to run services)

- There is a contradiction over commissioning and procurement strategy versus localism. Organisations wishing to take over the running of small, local services e.g. the running of a local park, may end up bidding for much larger contracts that they neither have the capacity nor desire to deliver.

Community budgets

- The local authority decides how money is spent within the borough.
- Contradiction over commissioning and procurement strategy (fewer and larger contracts) versus push for Big Society/localism.
- Will there be a borough-wide provider with local delivery by the Voluntary and Community Sector?

3. Michael Parkes

‘Localism: A neighbourhood planning perspective’

- Planning linked to new funding mechanisms.
- Partnership and resources, credibility and capacity are key to an effective planning strategy. However these are affected by language barriers and legal difficulties.
- Community participation can lead to better planning and delivery. You *can* do better for less.
- Genuine community involvement is politically and practically deliverable.
- Forewarned is forearmed.
- Regeneration is about people as well as place.
- Disadvantaged communities would rather get a slice of the action than be squeezed out completely.
- Community groups don't really get the advice they need and there is a legacy of distrust in inner-city communities. This poses problems for partnership working and needs to be addressed.
- Communities need access to independent neighbourhood technical aid, good research and practice.
- How to make a neighbourhood plan?
 - Produce an action plan to include what's currently available.
 - Start with the relatively easiest, do-able neighbourhoods. Learn from these and customise as you go along.
 - Outcome is likely to be more along Community Strategy / Local Area Agreement lines.
 - Temporary uses.
 - Have planners working with neighbourhood forums.
 - Utilise centres of expertise e.g. universities.

4. Chris Widgery & David Joyce

‘Localism: Specific measures, opportunities and challenges’

Chris

- Seems there is a strong drive within government to ensure the Big Society and Localism agenda are fulfilled.
- Power divulged to the people.

- Localism aimed at the grass-roots level and only involving the state if necessary.
- Within the Big Society people would have more power and responsibility.
- This equates to profound changes in the role of the state and local authority.
- There are six actions for the decentralisation agenda (see hand-out).
- Accountability issues with the new regime?
- Is there enough capacity in private and voluntary sectors to take the onus off the public sector?
- Do people have the time, energy, drive and expertise? Will they give up their free time?
- The Power of Competence will allow councils to do anything unless it's specifically legislated against.

Right to Challenge

- Need money and support to get to a point where you're able to challenge.

Right to Buy

- A 'community asset' has not yet been clearly defined.
- Assets are often easier to define in rural areas than in inner-city neighbourhoods.

David

- London Borough of Camden has a duty to support neighbourhoods in preparing plans.
- There is discrepancy over what constitutes a neighbourhood area in rural / inner-city regions.
- Only one plan is allowed per neighbourhood.
- A neighbourhood plan needs to fit within the Local Development Framework, and in London also the Regional Development Framework for London.
- Small-scale development is more contentious in less spacious areas, especially inner city neighbourhoods.
- Neighbourhood plans will need 50% approval of residents, achieved through local referendum.
- What about the remaining 50%?
- Ministerial decision has replaced the infrastructure planning commission.
- A development-led community neighbourhood plan contradicts local service delivery.
- What is the role of councils? To facilitate co-production of services, providing local leadership and accountability.

Challenges

- At the present time, Localism Bill has not been made an act of parliament. It is still going through the parliamentary stages. It is unknown how much of it will be adopted.
- How much do we want to buy into it?
- How much untapped community energy is there?
- Do people have resources, expertise, time and money to take over the running of council services?

You can download the PowerPoint presentation of each speaker by visiting the [CamdenCEN website](http://www.camdencen.org.uk) or

(<http://www.camdencen.org.uk/meetings.htm#speaker>)

Plenary session: Questions and Answers

1. *In terms of the definition of a neighbourhood area, who actually agrees the boundary of a neighbourhood in order to establish the neighbourhood plan? And who can submit a neighbourhood plan?*

David Joyce – it's the role of the local authority to decide neighbourhood boundaries however anyone can submit a plan to the council for consideration. The individual(s) in question will need to approach the council for recognition as a supported neighbourhood forum. If the plan or forum is deemed unreasonable, the local authority can reject it. Neighbourhood plans will be subject to a local referendum.

2. *What happens if planning applications overlap territories? Who will arbitrate that?*

David Joyce - again it's the role of the local authority to resolve this.

Michael Parkes - this demonstrates the opportunity for individuals and organisations to work together, for example, through steering groups. You could have private sector and credible community representatives coming together to discuss their vision for a neighbourhood plan.

3. *Chris mentioned changes to housing policy and housing benefit. This will result in demographic changes within a neighbourhood area. Communities won't necessarily exist in the same way as they did before. Has the council looked into this?*

Sarah Hayward – the Council has looked at the changes to social housing policy and reviewed the new housing strategy and proposals. We have

already seen changes in claimants and applications and the detail is changing quite significantly. Policy is changing very quickly and the council will resist the moves that cause most demographic change. We will resist forcing lower income workers outside the borough.

4. *Michael Parkes was quoted over disadvantaged communities preferring a slice of the action rather than be being squeezed out of their neighbourhood completely. People are asked to become more active at a local level whilst simultaneously being yanked out of the picture through all the other legislative changes. Is it possible to do that? Can we not ring-fence these particular areas instead?*

Michael Parkes – the property market won't go away. Disadvantaged communities need planners and developers too. What is critical from the outset is that partnerships create balanced involvement of both private, public and voluntary and community sectors.

Sarah Hayward – the private market has escalated higher than social rates. Social housing was tentatively charged out at market rate. There is not enough housing regardless of what price bracket it's in. Short answer is no, this isn't possible.

5. *Talking about a “slice of the action”; who will be left out there to take over public services? If the voluntary sector is decimated by funding cuts, who else is going to be in a position, with resources and capacity to take over services? Only private organisations will be left to fill the gap!*

Simone Hensby – there is a possibility of businesses paying voluntary and community organisations to deliver local services.

Sarah Hayward - can businesses front-load services when they don't know if or when they'll get paid by government? We don't how the model is going to work yet.

Simone Hensby - it's about social investment. Business can front-load services if they don't have a cash-flow problem. However, if targets aren't met then this money will be clawed back.

- 5.1) *Can't you establish a starter grant?*

Simone Hensby - depends on the level of risk. A starter grant scheme would need approval.

6. *If services for vulnerable and disadvantaged communities will not be ring-fenced, how will the local authority guarantee a minimum provision*

of services for people who are not seen so favourably within a community e.g. homelessness?

Sarah Hayward – the issue is that the council is losing money. Statutory obligations must be met first. In terms of future guarantees we only have an agreed two year funding settlement. We anticipate further cuts in years 6, 7 and 8. So more money will be taken away from the local authority.

6.1) What about using quality impact assessments to ensure minimum provision?

Sarah Hayward - yes we will do. And they may be used increasingly to monitor changes e.g. homelessness is likely to increase due to lack of employment. The challenge is how the local authority and voluntary sector work together to make the case for service provision.

7. Just wanted to make the point that regarding accountability, maybe we could use a system like that used with Amazon or eBay, whereby service providers and service users are rated for the efficiency and effectiveness.

8. To me it seems that feelings surrounding the Localism Bill are all quite raw at the moment. In order to work, the whole process will require the integrity of all sectors. We need a non-political long term strategy to take this forward and ensure minority groups are represented.

Michael Parkes - I see an important role here for the council and voluntary sector to work in partnership together. We need more things like this seminar, critical focus groups, future consultations etc to ensure localism is delivered in an appropriate fashion.

David Joyce - localism is defined as a bottom-up approach.

9. I feel that there are certain principles within the Bill that do seem appealing and I'm looking for the opportunities this presents; however I'm also looking at the tensions it might cause. Moving forward I see issues and confusion for charities where discretionary rate relief (DRR) is refused because they work across boroughs or provide services to people who live outside their defined local area. How do different funders view cross-borough organisations and how does this relate to tensions about how the localism agenda is being applied within the voluntary and community sector?

Sarah Hayward - DRR presents a challenge for localism and a challenge for finance and budgeting. One argument is why should Camden rate payers be solely responsible for pan London or even national beneficiaries? Cannot other boroughs pick up some of the cost? The current funding regime is forcing a route of decision making that needs to

benefit Camden rather than projects that would be nice to fund but there simply isn't money for.

10. We need to make sure that the real community are consulted, the people who live in the local areas. Who chooses the neighbourhood definition?

Donna Turnbull – David has already mentioned discussions with residents groups and the proposed process for submitting neighbourhood plans. We will follow this up with more information as the localism agenda develops.

END

Delegate List

Name	Organisation
Ali Farkhunda Jabeen.	Elfrida Rathbone Camden
Amy MacConnachie	St Mungo's
Bill Risbero	CARIS Camden and C4WS.
Caroline Lister	1A ARTS etc
Chris Widgery	London Borough of Camden
Cllr Sarah Haywood	London Borough of Camden
Constantine Buhayer	Gospel Oak Safer Neighbourhood Panel Gospel Oak Partnership Mansfield Conservation committee Friends of Queen's Crescent Library
Darian Mitchell	Amwell Society
David Blagbrough	Camden Square Conservation Area Advisory Committee
David Joyce	London Borough of Camden
Donna Liburd	Kingsgate Community Centre
Dr. Jim Walsh	South Place Ethical Society
Duncan McLaggan	Voluntary Action Islington
Edward Crask	Camden Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations
Frances Eley	St Pancras Community Centre
Gareth Radford	The Camden Society
Helia Evans	Ossulston Tenants and Residents Association
Jan Knight	Camden CAB Service Limited
Janet Dyer	Coram
Jim Murray	West End Community Network

Joan Moffatt	Fordwych Tenants Association
Julian Fedosiuk	West End Community Network
Kit Wilby	Kingsgate Community Centre
Lilian Brafman	Redington Frogna! Association and Hampstead Conservation Area Advisory Committee
Lindsay Richardson	Abbey Community Centre
Louise Gates	Calthorpe project
Luisa Auletta	Camden Town Conservation Area Advisory Committee
Mary Cane	Camden Civic Society
Michael Parkes	Kings Cross Railway Strategic Liaison Group
Michael Rose	
Peter Ward	Camden Community & Police Consultative Group
Robert Taylor	Camden Federation of Private Tenants (CFPT)
Rokiah Yaman	Creative Health Lab
Ruth Appleton	Sante Refugee Mental Health Access
Shelagh O'Connor	New Horizon Youth Centre
Simone Hensby	Voluntary Action Camden
Steve Adams	Mansfield Conservation Area Advisory Committee
Susan Rose	Highgate Conservation Area Advisory Committee
Thomas Brent	Hampstead Conservation Area Advisory Committee

Total = 39 organisations