

# WHAT IS LOCALISM?



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# Foreword

## **Localism has for decades been the guiding philosophy of the National Association of Local Councils.**

This is to be expected from 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. 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. This is real localism.

Local (community, neighbourhood, parish, town and village) councils serve electorates ranging from small rural communities to large towns and small cities, are all independently elected, and raise a precept from the local community.

Over 15 million people live in communities served by local councils, around 35 percent of the population, and over 200 new local councils have been created in the last 10 years.

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

In this pamphlet parliamentarians from the three main political parties as well as other influential thinkers share their thoughts on localism. And on what they think localism and the concept of Big Society means to local councils.

**Cllr Michael Chater**  
Chairman, NALC



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# Parish and town councils must be at the heart of the Big Society

**Whitehall is being turned on its head. For decades central government hoarded power while councils were strangled by prescribed ‘one-size-fits’ diktats on the one hand and smothered by regional bureaucracy on the other.**

This government is busting open the established way of doing things and pushing power away from the centre – to every council, neighbourhood and home in the country. For parishes and town councils, long-term advocates of a localist approach, it’s time to seize the opportunities that are coming your way.

Our priorities in government are very simple: localism, localism and localism. Because if you want to restore faith in politics, you make sure that local government is properly accountable to local people, not Westminster. If you want people to feel like they have a stake in the future of their communities, that they are really connected to what’s going on, then you

give people closer to home a real say over what happens there, and the power to make a difference. This is what localism is all about. Liking people - trusting them to know what’s best.

That’s how we move away from big government and start to build the Big Society. Instead of top-down controlling government, people will be free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities. The Big Society is about people setting up great new schools, businesses helping people getting trained for work, charities working to rehabilitate offenders and a huge range of other voluntary initiatives. To achieve this we need community empowerment –



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neighbourhoods in charge of their own destiny who feel if they club together and get involved they can shape the world around them. Parish and town councils are the most local tier of government in this country, the grassroots, and they can and are playing a key role in delivering the Big Society.

The era of arbitrary regional government administering bureaucratic targets is over. We've set about abolishing the Regional Spatial Strategies, Regional Assemblies, and Regional Development Agencies. They were unpopular, ineffective and inefficient. When politics becomes the preserve of people who are only interested in power and control, the political system starts to break down. That's what we've seen over the past thirteen years. The previous government didn't trust people or councils and the regions worked for Whitehall, helping to centralise every decision.

There was no room for creativity or innovation in public services as a result. The national economy became completely unbalanced. We can't afford this any more. It's time to rebalance power in this country and wrest control away from bureaucrats, quangos and government departments and push it as far away from Whitehall as possible and back to the grassroots.

Take the Regional Spatial Strategies, which imposed thousands of unsustainable homes - including

on Green Belt land - on communities against their will. We've abolished these top-down targets. Instead, we are giving councils and local people the freedom to decide where development should go. Our New Homes Bonus will ensure communities that go for growth reap the benefits of development, not just the costs. We want more neighbourhood involvement to encourage sustainable development. Parish and town councils have been major players in developing community-led planning over the years and this should continue on a wider scale.

A good example is Action with Communities in Cumbria, which has undertaken community development work to support the roll out of community planning, including leading a consultation on post office closure. Over 140 parishes have been involved in community planning so far - representing about 50 percent of parishes in the county.

We want to give power to local people to form trusts that will make it simpler for them to build new homes or other development that their community wants. The Community Right to Build will give any community which wishes to benefit from development the right to proceed without a specific planning application as long as they can meet various minimum criteria such as demonstrating strong local approval. Parish and town councils can use these powers to help their



communities secure the development they want. NALC and its members are well positioned to raise awareness of this radical new approach and I urge them to do so.

Everything the coalition is changing has been about giving up control, restoring the balance of power. That's why we have also cut the ring fencing and red tape which comes attached to hundreds of millions pounds worth of central government grants. We've also put an end to unwanted 'garden grabbing' putting the decision back in the hands of local people.

Localism is the principle, the mantra that defines everything we do. Our Localism Bill will help free local government from the shackles of central government control. It will continue the overhaul of the planning system, give voters more power over local government spending and let the community take over rural pubs or post offices and increase broadband access through encouraging home grown Big Society initiatives.

And localism isn't just about giving power back to local government. It's not a tug of war between the two of us. It's even more important that we push power onwards and outwards closer to people. If people know they can make a difference, then there's a reason to stand up and be counted, a reason to get involved. So we want to make sure people can take control and take responsibility in their street, their estate, their town. This means district, county, parish and town

councils and local people working together in their neighbourhoods, as the basis for the Big Society.

I genuinely believe that there has never been a better time to be involved in local government at all levels. Some councils still can't quite believe they're getting the freedom they wanted. No one in local government signed up to be told what to do for the rest of their lives by Whitehall. There is a real opportunity for councillors to have far more fulfilling, rewarding roles; exercising genuine choice and power; changing the face of their neighbourhoods and making a difference to people's lives.

This sets the scene for the most radical shake up of power there has been for a generation. Be as ambitious as you can. Be as radical as you like. Be as bold as you want. From now on accountability is to the people not the government machine.

### **Bob Neill MP**

*Bob Neill MP has represented the constituency of Bromley and Chislehurst since 2006. With the formation of the coalition government, Neill was appointed as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government.*

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# Local councils – Big results

**Congratulations to NALC for continuing to press the case for town and parish councils as a practical and meaningful way of enabling local communities to exercise power and make a practical difference in their towns and neighbourhoods.**

It is often been seen as something of a thankless task to serve on a town or parish council, generally viewed as a purely rural phenomenon, concerned with the passage of sheep across ancient bridleways or arcane bylaws about market days dating back to the 13th century. But in recent years the role of the first tier of local government has been the subject of fresh examination.

There are around 80,000 elected parish councillors in England and a growing number of these are making significant contributions to the governance of communities in urban areas. For the first time in over 45 years, parish and town councils can be established in London and I am pleased to see plans currently moving

forward in London's East End to establish a town council in Wapping.

Millions of people are now represented by new unitary council arrangements, covering considerable areas such as Cheshire East and West, Durham, Portsmouth and Cornwall. I was happy to promote larger unitary authorities with the scale and resources to provide high quality services, but I always wanted them to be underpinned by many more local councils and neighbourhood organisations which could connect local communities to issues they really care about.

Getting local government infrastructure right is an ever-evolving process. And in order to make a real

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difference, parish councils need to have access to and influence over resources. The development of a 'Total Place' approach, or 'Community Budgets' as Eric Pickles likes to call them, could be hugely significant.

Total Place aims to bring together the budgets of local agencies: the NHS, education, Police, Local Government, etc, to set local priorities and then to find the most effective ways of delivering them. This should result in squeezing out inefficiency and duplication, as often each separate service will be targeting the same families and the same issues. If this approach is taken at neighbourhood levels it could provide a practical vehicle for community councils to exercise real democratic power across the things that matter most to local people.

If community budgets can be linked to the newly emerging techniques of participatory budgeting involving the whole community, then this will strengthen support and trust in the democratic process. Moving on further to the transfer of assets to local community organisations would be a logical next step which community councils could facilitate to help local people take greater responsibility.

This could be an exciting time for local councils, but they must always be careful not to become simply an additional layer of bureaucracy – they must stay resolutely focused on what they can do to bring about

change and improvements.

Over recent years people have felt shut out of the political system – 'it doesn't touch my life,' 'it's too remote,' 'I don't understand what they're talking about' are common responses. Local councils can combat that sense of exclusion and reinvigorate local governance. But they must work together and with other agencies and local groups. They should not hanker after independence. Working in isolation and choosing a silo mentality over cross-boundary working will not only weaken democracy, but is a model for inefficient service delivery.

Earlier this year Labour set out plans for parish and town councils to be given new powers to build affordable homes. These extended permitted development rights are now being taken forward by the Coalition Government and there is also a growing campaign calling for parish councils to be given powers to protect and run local services, such as post offices.

At a time when re-thinking public service delivery is high on the agenda of all political parties, local solutions have never been more valued. The opportunities that present themselves for local councils will best be seized by reaching out to forge new partnerships. Working with community groups and the voluntary sector is needed to generate new ideas and innovations within the structure of local government.



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Better local governance is something we all aspire to. But we shouldn't lose sight of its essential components. They are the same as any other part of our democracy. Too much woolly theorising about the 'Big Society' can at times make local solutions appear overly complex and ambiguous.

For localism to thrive we need councils with strong leadership and a clear vision, a willingness to listen and be prepared to work with others as a team, respect for ordinary people and accountability to communities that they serve.

You do not have to look that far to see how the town council model can thrive either. In France there is a Mayor in every municipality. Close to the people they serve, living and working in the community. It has to be effective to work. But it is not always the big structures that deliver the best results. Small can be beautiful. But I would say that wouldn't I?

**Rt Hon Hazel Blears MP**

*Hazel Blears has represented the seat of Salford and Eccles since 1997. She held various ministerial posts during the previous Labour government, serving as Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government between 2007-09.*

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# Localism - A true transformation

**The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has announced that his priorities are localism, localism and localism.**

In response I have indicated that within all parties in the House of Commons there will be, I believe, a great deal of support for genuine efforts to devolve powers and responsibilities to local councils.

The Communities and Local Government Select Committee, of which I was a member in the last Government, produced a report on the balance of power between central and local government in which we also proposed a new constitutional settlement. As chair of the new Select Committee I have already written to the Deputy Prime Minister about this.

Experience would teach us, however, that politicians in general are more supportive of devolving powers and responsibilities in opposition than when in government. Once Ministers get their hands on the levers of power they are often disinclined to let go.

It also has to be said that devolving power and responsibilities without the financial resources to make

a reality of the policies and commitments would be a fairly hollow gesture. It is difficult to see how a truly localist change could be produced when £3 out of every £4 locally spent is handed down from the Treasury.

I am writing this article after the announced Select Committee enquiry into localism has begun. At this stage the views I am expressing are my own ones and I am looking forward to the enquiry which I am sure will help identify the issues which need developing to make localism work in a practical way. The select committee will at some stage want to look again at local government finances for the reasons I have mentioned.

My view of the localism agenda has local authorities, whether unitary, district, borough, county, parish or town councils at its heart. This is not simply a matter of transferring powers, responsibilities and financial control down to a more local level but a transformation which means that those making the



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decisions and raising the money at a local level can be held properly accountable by local authorities.

I think within local government there is a genuine welcome for reducing interference and the handing down of decisions from above and ensuring the local electorate are better placed to hold their elected representatives to account. To do this however electorates and communities will need good information, particularly about the comparative performance of authorities and that is one reason for my concern about the decision to abolish the Audit Commission with no clear understanding about who will carry out value for money studies.

The issue of potential conflict between the desire to have local decision making but also to recognise the UK Government's need to ensure national provision of services across the country is one which will need resolution in a number of areas. The Government's decision to abolish housing targets previously part of the Regional Spatial Strategies and replace them with financial incentives to encourage approvals at local level is a good example of the problem of a potential tension between local decisions and national provision.

Local councils will also have to recognise that even in a more decentralised system there will be a right and a need for central government to be able to lay down minimum standards of service which councils are able to go beyond at a local level.

Because of my view that localism has to have a strong democratic flavour, I also believe the decisions currently taken by the Government at local level outside the remit of local authorities should also be brought within the democratic framework. If we are really seeking genuine local decision making we would transfer the decision making of Primary Care Trusts not to GPs, who are actually self employed contractors, but to local councils.

I also believe that if there were to be a comprehensive review of service delivery at local level and real choices about priorities then we would not be fragmenting decision making and keeping particular services in individual silos. I am therefore concerned that electing a police commissioner and having more academies outside local authority control will make for worse rather than better government at local level.

To see local authorities and local democracy as key to accountable localism is not to argue that councils should or must do everything. Total Place is about joining up services and utilising assets not all of which are the direct responsibility of local councils. But councils are uniquely placed to develop the necessary strategic approach and take the lead on bringing various organisations together because they have the democratic legitimacy of having been elected by their communities.

I also believe that localism is not simply about



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transferring powers from Whitehall to town hall but allowing town halls to develop ways of involving their communities in a whole variety of ways which some of them are already doing. Indeed the strength of local government is that given the freedom to act, councils will come up with many new and innovative ways of doing things and then of course other councils will see good ideas and copy them or look at things that don't work and decide to not adopt them. Recognising differences in needs and priorities between different parts of the country, it is entirely reasonable that individual councils will come to different conclusions about the way forward from their neighbours. Different choices can be made and we should not be frightened of them. Post code lotteries are rightly the subject of criticism but different communities with different postcodes have a right to make different choices.

Some local authorities will already have parishes and town councils and it is right that they will want to work with them and encourage them to become part of a comprehensive process of seeking the views of local people and indeed in some cases service delivery as well.

Finally, we live in a very interesting time with local democracy in our country. I fundamentally believe that decisions should be taken at the lowest level possible and that locally elected representatives are key to the success of this process. To be successful this will need

to cut across a whole range of services, not just those devolved down from the Communities and Local Government Department, and allow councils the right to raise revenue in order to transform policy aspirations into action. It will require Ministers to make a long term commitment to non-interference. It is fundamentally unhelpful to announce localism as a way forward and the next day say how councils should organise their refuse collection

#### **Clive Betts MP**

*Clive Betts MP has represented his Sheffield (previously Sheffield Attercliffe, now Sheffield South East) seat since 1992. He was elected Chairman of the Communities and Local Government Select Committee in June 2010.*

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# Parish councils – The ‘Big Society’ in action

**The Prime Minister has now said repeatedly that the Big Society is his passion and that he wants it to be his most lasting positive legacy.**

Where the Prime Minister leads, an industry emerges: think-tanks ponder it; civil servants wish to legislate on it; columnists debate it; new ministers are created to propagate it. But what is the ‘Big Society’? Local government thinks it means more local government; businessmen: privatisation; charities: money for charities and individualists hope it means less interference. While for cynics, the ‘Big Society’ is a mask for something negative: just as a Ministry of Information is in reality a Ministry of Disinformation; so for opponents, the Big Society simply means small government.

All these people tend to assume that the ‘Big Society’ will be a program: with a funding stream, universal rules, a hierarchy of officials and standard procedures: like a road-building program; or a new

school with its buildings, budgets, management structure, a national curriculum, exams, targets and inspections. All expect the ‘Big Society’ to be investing in one of the four old categories: the state, private sector, charities or the individual. But all these views are mistaken. The ‘Big Society’ will generally have no budget, no universal and predictable procedures. Instead it will be flexible, adjusted to a particular place or people. The ‘Big Society’s’ concern is not with government, business, ‘the third sector’ or individuals but with something quite different called ‘society’. All the others may contribute greatly to society but they are not themselves society.

Let me give you an example. My Cumbrian constituency is so sparsely populated that government could not afford to deliver broadband to everyone in the

next five years, and businesses or charities or individuals wouldn't either (laying the fibre-optic cabling alone could cost £40 million). But in a 'Big Society' model the government could build a high-speed cabinet in each parish (which would just about be affordable) and encourage the community to take it from there. Each parish could then choose its own system, choose between a cheaper wireless system or a more expensive fibre system, ask local farmers to dig the fibre-optic trenches themselves, costing a fifth of what BT would charge, and run their own network, or get a contractor to do so for them.

Government could play an important role by opening access to primary schools' cables, helping communities to fire radio signals from mobile telephone masts; asking favours from railway companies to access their fibre and making soft loans (allowing a householder to repay a £1000 investment in broadband over twenty years not one). But government would then be contributing a public asset rather than cash; political support rather than instruction; a loan not a grant and it would be abolishing laws rather than making new ones. The government would move from being a failed provider to a successful facilitator. And the end result is not a 'cut' but instead a community getting something which the government would never have delivered: an opportunity for Cumbrians to consult a medical

specialist in Kent or learn about new approaches to grass management from an expert from Wales down a live video-link without leaving home.

Which bring us to parishes and local councils: everything – from organising communities to building affordable housing or generating renewable energy, (which is our 'Big Society' project in Crosby Ravensworth), or taking over a community centre, (which is our project in Kirkby Stephen), or rolling out broadband across the fells of Cumbria – needs a democratic body. If a community draws up its own planning regulations, giving it the final say on what can be built and where, that plan must be approved democratically and this should require a parish or group of parishes.

The 'Big Society' is an attitude of mind not a program: it believes that local groups - in our case parish and town councils – can be canny, competent and creative. It believes that local decisions are more informed, popular, practical, and sustainable than government traditionally imagines. It believes that communities should be given the freedom to take risk, take responsibility and when necessary challenge regulations and government restrictions. But the responsibility is mutual: if parishes are given more power, they should also learn to take the larger public view and consider the consequences of their decisions

beyond the parish line. The 'Big Society' is local democracy in the broadest and most generous sense.

**Rory Stewart MP**

*Rory Stewart MP was elected to Parliament in May 2010 to represent the seat of Penrith and the Border and is Chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Local Democracy.*



# Looking for best practice, look no further than Lanchester!

**Lanchester is the village that I am proud to say I have lived in for the past 25 years. Lanchester is a village of 4,000 people, 8 miles west of Durham.**

Originally a Roman settlement, it is centred around its pretty village green and dominated by its Norman church. The surrounding parish is largely agricultural and the main industries are farming related. There are 3 active churches, 3 oversubscribed schools (a Catholic primary, a Church of England primary and a secondary school) and over 170 active community organisations. Central to the community is Lanchester Parish Council (LPC) which I served on for three years before entering Parliament in May.

LPC is a fully elected parish council with no co-opted members and represents a wide range of views. It has a majority of Labour members but is run on a

non-political basis with the interests of the parish paramount. The Independent and Conservative members play a valuable and fully active part in all aspects of its work. All of the parish councillors live within the parish which makes them closer to the community they represent, best placed to understand the issues and able to focus on advancing the interests of the parish. Often the parish council takes on issues that Durham County Council cannot, given its much wider remit.

LPC sees its role as promoting the village and the parish, facilitating community activities, organising and sponsoring community events, promoting community



spirit and inclusiveness and supporting local clubs and organisations.

### **Lanchester Parish Council – What makes it work?**

There must be many examples of great parish councils. I can only talk of my experience serving on LPC. It strikes me that what makes LPC really work well can be boiled down to three key characteristics: its voluntarism and inclusiveness; its forward looking and ‘can-do’ attitude; and its outward looking approach.

Parish council members took a collective and unanimous decision that there would be no allowances paid; all members give their time and expertise at no cost to the community, allowing LPC to draw on all the village’s talents and skills. For example, parish council members include a local farmer, a number of retired senior officers from local and central government and the police, local businessmen and representatives of the voluntary sector.

LPC’s prime motivation is to further the interests of the village and parish. To that end it has developed close links with local organisations, such as the Lanchester Partnership. LPC is always mindful that in order to deliver enhanced services to local people, the council must work with the community to develop the parish as a whole – the village, the outlying settlements and the wider farming community. It is not about maintaining

and preserving the existing village/parish in aspic.

Lanchester is fortunate to have an active parish clerk who is fully qualified. This was instrumental in LPC receiving ‘Quality Parish’ status. The parish council meets monthly and is always well attended, not only of course by members, but also by interested members of the community, The Village Voice newspaper and by representatives from important community organisations, such as the police and the County Council. LPC’s close relationship with Durham County Council is enhanced by the fact that one of LPC’s members also serves as a county councillor. This provides a valuable link between the parish council and its principal council. LPC is also proud to be a member of NALC and benefits from the support and expertise that the National Association offers.

### **Lanchester Parish Council – What does it do?**

I think I can speak on behalf of all Lanchester parish councillors when I say that I am proudest of the many examples which have real practical application to day to day life in the parish:

- LPC has a parish website that is regularly updated, produces a quarterly newsletter and an annual report and works closely with the Lanchester Partnership to publish a monthly parish newspaper, The Village Voice, which includes detailed reporting



on the work of the parish council. All this helps to develop strong community links and community cohesion and ownership.

- LPC worked with the Lanchester Partnership to secure funding to build 3 play parks in the village and 2 in the outlying settlements. One of the play parks was specifically designed by local teenagers. It is part of an integrated sports area which includes the village cricket, football and rugby clubs. A bike track was also requested by the young people who worked with LPC to secure the funding and design the award winning park. The young people involved won awards from the High Sheriff of County Durham for their community spirit. The employment of a handyman, funded by LPC, is an important element in the parks' ongoing success, ensuring that unlike many play parks, they always remain fully operational, safe and free from vandalism and graffiti.
- LPC provides financial support to a wide range of parish organisations, which include the Lanchester Brass Band, the cricket and rugby clubs, a local hospice and community activities at the local schools. Working with Lanchester Partnership, LPC has also secured funding to operate a village bus around the parish which has proved very popular, particularly by older and disabled members of the community.
- The village green lies at the heart of vibrant village life. Increasing its use for community events is a key objective for LPC. These include the Christmas and Easter festivities, Village Fête and Remembrance Day Services. LPC provides and maintains the Christmas lights and tree, hanging baskets and flower arrangements, seating around the parish and litter bins. It supports the Lanchester Partnership in twice-yearly litter picks and a number of events that bring the whole parish together, such as the Christmas Eve carol service on the village green.
- LPC, in conjunction with partners, has a role in local planning and has produced two important documents following major community consultation:
  1. the Village Design Statement which looks at existing and future planning within the village to ensure that it grows in an appropriate and sympathetic manner, particularly around the village green and the conservation area;
  2. more recently the Parish Locality Map which takes a wider view of the parish, the village plus the outlying settlements, with a particular emphasis on the local farming community.
- LPC is currently carrying out an environmental survey of all public buildings in the village as it

recognises its important role in working with partners to limit the impact of climate change on the environment. These include the 3 schools and the community centre.

I could go on and provide many more examples of the achievements of Lanchester Parish Council. I am proud of what the council has achieved during the time that I have served on it and what it continues to achieve. I am a real advocate of what parish councils can achieve if they really engage with their communities, and while I may be biased, I think that Lanchester stands out as a beacon parish council with many examples of best practice.

**Pat Glass MP**

*Pat Glass MP was elected to Parliament in May 2010 to represent the seat of Durham North West and is Vice Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Local Democracy.*

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# The importance of localism

**Back in 2003 when I sought a seat to fight in the 2005 general election, I was specifically looking to stand in a constituency where it and the people who lived there had a strong sense of identity.**

This could either have been a city or town seat, or a seat comprising a number of rural communities. Having been born in Birkenhead, lived near to Chester and then studied at St David's University College in Wales, local identity and self-determination were always an important part of the cultures that surrounded me when growing up.

I was therefore delighted to be selected in 2004 to fight the seat of Lincoln and then eventually elected earlier in this year. The city has a clear identity, as do the surrounding villages of Bracebridge Heath, Skellingthorpe and Waddington - all of which have active parish councils.

The current move to encourage more localism by the two coalition parties is on the one hand entrenching

what has been in place for centuries, but also rolls back the threats to localism of recent years. This is important because localism and the vitality of the bodies that NALC represents, relies on the philosophical alignment of both the Government at a national level and principal authority level, with the parish or town councils.

For localism to work there has to be political leadership at the top. Localism needs air to breathe, space to expand and flexibility to innovate. This is air, space and flexibility in a political framework that allows it (localism) to flourish. National politicians will stand up for localism and ensure it is given that ability to flourish through a *laissez-faire* attitude rather than state interventionist tendencies.

I am certain the previous government did not

believe in localism, neither did civil servants, council officials or the legions of bureaucrats in quangos and public bodies.

From Health and Safety officials attempting to ban events such as Remembrance Day marches and village fetes; to the need for community centres/village halls to deal with endless bureaucracy on licenses; to the needless closure of post offices; to the imposition of bin rules on villages and towns irrespective of local opinion; and housing plans that take no interest in the needs (especially infrastructure) of individual towns or villages - where were the national politicians actually standing up for localism? Certainly the Labour Government were not, and neither were local councillors. On numerous occasions I have seen a council press officer try and defend the indefensible. Actually, it should have been the Council Leader or cabinet/executive member in front of the microphone, or the government minister sat on the Breakfast TV sofa saying, '... it's not their responsibility, it's the fault of quango x,y,z'.

This is no longer acceptable, politicians at both national and local level have a duty to set the tone for the civil servants and officials to follow. If officials apply rules in a nonsensical fashion then politicians should stand up and be counted and stop the march of such bureaucracy. 'Less is more' must be our motto. It may enthuse those who have previously thought twice

about becoming involved or entice back those who have banged their head one-too-many-times against the bureaucratic brick wall.

So that is the localism supported by our national political leadership, but what about town and parish councils themselves?

Having been a parish councillor in Wrotham, Kent (along with Cordelia my wife), a school governor and a magistrate, I have witnessed localism at a grassroots level. I have also witnessed the first class support that NALC gave, and continues to give, those involved in parish and town councils.

The role of town and parish councils in the overall framework of the emerging localism agenda is crucial to its success and also gives us great opportunities to take power back and return it to local people. I am not suggesting that anyone should commandeer a tank and drive it down their village high street as Wolfie "Power to the People" Smith did in Tooting (BBC's Citizen Smith), rather the responsible return of decision making by, and for, local communities.

There is a growing opportunity for services to be provided locally, especially those which the principal authority is not statutorily obliged to provide. These include libraries, community centres, sports facilities and the maintenance and protection of the local environment. Additionally, localism gives the



opportunity to attract more people who live under a parish or town council to become involved in their local community rather than leaving it to others. The emerging success of communities taking over pubs threatened with closure is an encouraging sign of just what localism can do.

The government sees local councils as the first building blocks and not as inconvenient organisations full of local busybodies. It is important that councils and councillors do not feel threatened in any way or feel that they will be lumbered with new responsibilities. It is one thing for a national government to promote a policy, but it is another for council leaders and council cabinet members to say it (and believe it); but say it they must.

Another area where I see potential growth is in the issue of parish or town 'news'. There has been a terrible decline in local media because of the shift of local newspaper advertising to online advertising. This is not helped by the recession as it means fewer people are buying local newspapers. This has resulted in fewer local journalists and a cut in content, especially local.

Many parish and town councils produce publications and I envisage these becoming ever-more important, but they do not have to be in print, just online. There has been a move in this direction for sometime in the USA and the UK is now following, perhaps we are entering an age of the citizen journalist.

Lincoln, for example, has this trend. A good example of an online-only daily news site is The Lincolnite. This is constantly updated and rich in interesting local content. I would also encourage more local and community radio as this type of media embeds a sense of ownership for everyone in the locality. Media outlets such as this should be supported and welcomed by town and parish councils.

Localism now has a bright future and a structured framework to make it successful. As a constituency MP, I will be holding the coalition government to account, ensuring they meet their side of the bargain and also working with those delivering localism at a grassroots level. I want to ensure that pieces of the jigsaw are firmly in place, allowing localism the air, space and flexibility to flourish. This once in a generation opportunity cannot be missed.

### **Karl McCartney MP**

*Karl McCartney was elected in May 2010 to represent the seat of Lincoln and is a former parish councillor on Wrotham Parish Council.*



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# Councils should play their part in localist revolution

**Could it be that the localist moment has arrived? Quite unexpectedly the coalition government has created a once in a generation opportunity to change the landscape of political decision making in Britain.**

It could be one of those rare moments in political history where policy idea meets the sweet spot of political opportunity. The political crisis created by the MP's expenses scandal, the shock of the financial and economic crisis and the erosion of trust in big government has created the conditions for an unexpected revolution: town and parish councils should be a component of that revolution.

The concept of 'decentralisation' is now right at the heart of the agenda of the government. It is, arguably, the defining concept of its governing philosophy. The idea of devolving power from the centre to individuals, local government and communities is now central to the reforming ambitions of the coalition, particularly in the

wider set of policies within the idea of the Big Society.

Over the years the drive towards centralisation has been inexorable – a centrifugal force which has become unstoppable and has come at a considerable price. Indeed, I would argue that this long march of centralisation has been one of the main causes of the problems that have manifested themselves over the last two decades – the collapse of trust in politics and the effectiveness of political decision making; the ineffective way in which central government has handled the management of public services and the general sense within local communities that political decision making has become remote from the grass-roots of social life. These forces also had the affect of

snuffing out the culture of volunteering, of mutuality and sense of community which had previously been characteristic of many local areas.

There are two ends of the spectrum within the localist movement. The first, 'localist fundamentalists' believe that we need to sweep away all existing institutions of the discredited central state – including local government as we know it – in order to usher in a bright, hopeful localist utopia. There have been some good ideas which have been cast in this fundamentalist mould – Directly Elected Police Chiefs and Directly Elected Mayors for England's cities being just two examples.

The second group, 'pragmatic localists' are more willing to see a continued and central role for local government in the delivery of a localist future. They believe that existing structures - including parish councils which already provide small scale accountability and mechanisms for local accountability in many areas of the country – should be moulded to suit localist ends and not thrown out as redundant relics of the past. The pragmatic localists are no less radical and share many of the characteristics of the fundamentalists; for example, they believe that where possible, decision making should be decentralised to the lowest practical level in the fundamental belief that as a result better, more effective and more locally responsive

decisions will be taken. Whether a fundamentalist or pragmatist, for town and parish councils, they must be able to point to tangible results that they have achieved in their communities.

There are sceptics who say, dismissively, that all this talk of localism is just a disguise for an ideological attack on the state and ideologically driven spending cuts.

These critics may be surprised to see that this localist revolution, far from being traditionally ideological, is a genuine response to the political and social malaise brought on by the corrosive power of centralisation. On the other hand these sorts of critics will probably never be convinced. There is also another group of sceptics who say that it is easy to be a localist in opposition but the realities of power make centralisers of us all. The culture of government in Britain, so the argument goes, is such that it is impossible to resist the centralising impulse – to try and reform it is like tilting at windmills.

The government's early decisions to scrap RDA's and do away with Regional Spatial Strategies have been such an important early move in the revolution. It sends the signal that the era of remote, bureaucratic and unaccountable government is over and that local government - working with their communities - are now responsible and accountable for making key decisions on crucial areas such as economic development and spatial planning, and are directly accountable to local



people for their decisions. This is localism in action.

Local government also needs to force itself out of rigid and often mechanistic thinking. If the localist revolution is to truly take hold we urgently need a local government which embraces innovation with more people prepared to take on the status quo and stand up for their local communities. There will also be tensions and reversals, and therefore local government must be prepared to take a position on coalition reforms on issues such as schools, the NHS and policing. But as upper tier local government takes on more responsibility, town and parish councils must stand up and be counted as well.

So there needs to be a radical change of political culture – both locally and nationally – and the Department of Communities and Local Government under new Secretary of State Eric Pickles has acted quickly in the early days of the coalition creating a sense of urgency and momentum. The forthcoming ‘Decentralisation and Localism Bill’ will provide a further legislative entrenchment of this reform momentum and opportunities for NALC.

For this localist revolution is not just about tinkering with our governance arrangements but about a radical change in the way public services are delivered locally. The Total Place work in the latter days of the previous government demonstrated the way in which

the delivery of public services trapped in their silos can produce huge amounts of duplication and waste.

We need to act quickly – as the coalition government is on a number of fronts – so that decentralisation quickly becomes part of the ecosystem of government and gains an evolutionary foothold. Given their closeness to communities, town and parish councils have a responsibility to play a part in this revolution, seeking out new initiatives, and finding practical and simple solutions to everyday needs. Some ideas will take hold, flourish and become established. Others, though they seemed like good ideas at the time, may fail or change into something else. That is why this cannot be a prescriptive revolution – it thrives on the fertile soil of innovation and initiative.

Just after I was elected to the House of Commons in May I received a text message from a Local Government Leader which said ‘Congratulations – another localist at the centre’. There are quite a few of us now who have taken our places at the centre and are determined to use the power that we have to give more of it away.

### **James Morris MP**

*James Morris was elected to Parliament in May 2010 to represent the seat of Halesowen and Rowley Regis. Prior to joining Parliament, he was the Director of the thinktank Localis.*

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# Now's the time for small councils to think big!

**So what does the 'Big Society' mean? Well no-one seems too sure – even those who promote it.**

The Conservatives conjure up the idea of masses of volunteers waiting to be unleashed but, in reality, much of the rhetoric differs only from the Liberal Democrat's views of community politics, or Labour's views on neighbourhood development, in terms of language, not direction.

If, as I believe, each of the three main parties has now realised the errors created by the centralisation of our state over the past 70 years, then now is the time for those of us who truly believe in localism to put our best foot forward. We must develop hard, strong and practical ideas based on evidence in order to take advantage of this welcome move.

Town and parish councils should take full advantage of this policy shift in favour of localism and

look at what they do, why they do it and how they do it. The Local Government Association has promoted to central government the concept of 'Place Based Budgeting'. The idea is that the upper tier council will take some authority, in partnership with other providers, in bringing together all the public sector spending within their area. They can then develop a set of local outcomes, outputs and delivery mechanisms to meet local priorities.

We all know from the work on Total Place that there are far too many layers of government, quangos, inspectorates and bureaucratic rules standing between the tax payer and efficient service delivery. By localising budgets to principal council levels, better sense can be made of spending, and efficient and cost effective



monitoring can be put in place to ensure that the money achieves its outcomes.

But if that is true for principal councils, it must be just as true for district, town and parish councils. Who has a better sense of place than the town and parish councillor, or indeed the ward councillor in the metropolitan and large unitary authorities?

So if I were a town or parish councillor, I would be doing five things at the moment:

1. carrying on with the delivery of existing services provided with or through my council;
2. review all spending within my area by all public sector bodies to see if it is really meeting local needs;
3. offer new ways to principal/upper tier councils to join up services within your local council area - some of which could be provided to, or through your council;
4. establish a strong discipline of active scrutiny in order to check whether councils above yours are delivering 'place based budgeting' effectively;
5. developing a stronger sense of direction for your local community to take advantage of changes in planning and licensing regulations which will require more local input and less interference from Bristol.

This sounds like a lot of work. That is of course unavoidable. Greater opportunity goes hand in hand with increased workloads, particularly at the start when greater effort is required to get initiatives and programmes working well. I would challenge NALC and its members to rise to embrace this opportunity and meet the challenge.

I have seen at first-hand what good town and parish councils can do. I know that many, but by no means all, councils (at all levels) are up to the challenges that are around. I just hope that in two years time I will not be travelling around the country and find a multitude of councils (again at all levels) which were not confident in meeting the challenge that localism presents, which retreated to their bunker and which failed to take advantage of the opportunities of localism to deliver better services for their communities and constituents. Now is the time for all councils to raise their game, none more so than for the smaller town and parish councils to think big and make their mark!

### **Cllr Richard Kemp**

*Cllr Kemp is a Liberal Democrat Liverpool City Council councillor and leader of the Local Government Association Liberal Democrats.*

# Town and parish councils are the foundation building blocks of the Big Society

**Town and parish councils, the ‘first tier’ of local government, are uniquely placed to make a major contribution to building the Big Society.**

For too long town and parish councils have been an undervalued and underpowered part of our system of democracy and government. There have been some positive initiatives such as the Quality Parish scheme, but these were championed as part of policies for the well being of rural Britain, rather than to boost town and parish councils generally. In fact very often, such as in the drafting of legislation, town and parish councils have not been treated as part of local government at all. With hindsight this may have been a blessing because they remain unbloated by audit, inspection and bureaucracy, and unbound by the legal requirements and financial constraints that have enslaved districts and ‘upper tier’ local government.

The two very big exceptions in recent years where town and parish councils have been supported are the extension of the power of well being, and the continuation of their right to determine the level of their own council tax precept without the threat of capping or other sanctions. A further important development was the removal of the prohibition on town and parish councils in London, opening up opportunities to establish community governance in the capital. Now in this era of glasnost following the general election, the shackles are being removed from all of local government.

It is partly out of a commitment to localism, which runs deep amongst Cameron’s Conservatives, and partly



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of necessity in the context of cuts and efficiencies which must be delivered at a local level. In addition, many of the coalition's policies and legislative changes in other areas, such as community led planning and new approaches in housing will impact on town and parish councils. Community 'right to buy' and right to own assets, such as local community centres and leisure facilities, coupled with the 'right to bid' to run services, are big opportunities for town and parish councils too. These are not entirely new, there are already many examples of town and parish councils running facilities and services, however, both the policy and political drive and the new legislative framework will lead many more town and parish councils to expand their role. This will be fuelled by local cuts, 'efficiencies', and service transformation by upper tier local government.

Many councils see devolution to town and parish councils as a key part of their future strategy to maintain strong communities and essential services in a cold financial climate. It is easy to see how this will work in some service areas, such as parks and grounds maintenance, where there are already examples. The devolution of responsibility for other services presents a more complex challenge. Social care is a good example of where town and parish councils can do more but where it makes sense for upper tier authorities to retain a very significant role. Where a town or parish council

is considering taking on the running of services or assets, they will have to consider issues such as their capacity and resilience, the potential risks, including legal and financial, and their ability to act as an effective employer. Some parishes simply won't want to significantly increase their responsibilities. Others may wish to, but will not realistically be in a position to do so. Size and resources are an important consideration. There is a huge difference between a large town council and a tiny parish council, but this is not the critical issue. Democracy and vision are the two most important factors in how successful a town or parish council can be in delivering the Big Society.

The democratic accountability and mandate makes parish and town councils uniquely valuable. Where a local organisation is holding and using public money, is responsible for vital services, and is making choices that could have a major impact on citizens, then it should be accountable. Accountability can be achieved in different ways, but democratic accountability, through elected local representatives, is the strongest form. That is why I believe that town and parish councils should be consulted on local service provision and on any bids to run services or take over community assets. They should have the option, although not preferment, to bid or encourage alternative bids. It may also be appropriate to build a town and parish council into the governance

framework for a community run public service or public facility.

The Big Society vision is one in which town and parish councils can flourish as enabling organisations in their community. It is not essential to have large budgets or permanent staff in order to develop and deliver a vision for the community. Town and parish councils must harness and seek to develop strong local civil society, working with existing and new community and voluntary organisations. Business and the local public sector should also be part of the conversation too. This is what many councils are doing, often with the support of the local district or upper tier authority. The role of the town and parish council in this vision should be first and foremost is as an organisation that makes connections and choices with and on behalf of local people. This will require effective councillors who can offer local leadership and who can connect with the people they represent.

The new government is showing its commitment to localism by not being prescriptive about how local authorities should see their role in creating the Big Society. This is to be welcomed, but at the same time there is a need to share ideas, innovation and experiences amongst all tiers of local government. NALC is to be congratulated on taking the initiative. Helping local town and parish councillors to develop

and deliver a positive vision for their community at the same time as major public spending cuts start to bite will be a big challenge. If town and parish councils succeed in the years ahead they will build a Big Society that has small but strong local foundations.

### **Andy Sawford**

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