



Discussion Notes

A FUTURE VISION FOR LOCALISM

Summary

This is a note following a roundtable discussion hosted by Localis and Bracknell Forest Council considering the current localist foundations in the UK and how these can be built upon in the future. Paul Bettison, Leader of Bracknell Forest introduced and concluded the session, with a wide ranging discussion in between. The participants were:

Participant	Organisation
Cllr Paul Bettison	Bracknell Forest Council
Tom Shakespeare	Localis
Paul Raynes	Local Government Association
Jack Perschke	Conservative Implementation Team/ Derby South
Cllr Harry Phibbs	Hammersmith & Fulham / ConservativeHome
Marcial Boo	National Audit Office
Hamish Dibley	Kent County Council
Adam Schoenborn	ResPublica
Andrew Nathan	London Borough of Barnet
Jeremy Cox	Vanguard Consulting
Mike Morgan-Giles	Localis
Susana Forjan	Localis

Introduction by Paul Bettison

The Leader of Bracknell Forest sees the election and possible change of Government as a big opportunity for local government to have more powers.

He believes public services are important – how they are delivered and what it costs is what people care about.

What is Localism?

There is a perceived power shift to Central government. One participant noted there has been a movement of power towards Central government in the last 25 years, that has progressively eroded local government freedoms.

The right level – There was a general discussion and agreement that localism has a number of levels. It can mean devolution from Central government to Local authorities but also power devolved from Local authorities to local people (e.g. neighbourhood watch, parish councils) or directly to individuals.

What do people actually want? – A few participants agreed that people only care about what is happening right on their doorstep and what they can do about it. Therefore essentially services like bin collection, roads or planning are of interest.

What is the future of Localism?

We have reached a watershed moment. Some attendees commented that this has happened, firstly, because expenditure cuts of 20% are needed and secondly, because people have lost faith in their ability to influence politics. This means that there is a big opportunity to make a smaller Central government a reality.

There are a number of mainstream visions – A number of participants talked of both the Barnet (commissioning) and Essex (scrutiny and market regulator) approaches. A third approach, taken up by Lambeth (cooperatives) was not mentioned by any of the attendees. However, some contributors believe the key to these approaches, which a couple mentioned was - does it work?

System reconfiguration – One contributor mentioned that systems themselves need to be improved (e.g. planning). Another agreed, describing it as the 'John Seddon approach'. Others noted the importance of greater transparency and accountability throughout

service provision.

Power to people – One participant noted the benefits of personalised budgets for citizens which will help towards a more demand led system. Others agreed in the importance of devolving decision making to local people e.g. through neighbourhood watch. Local people could decide on issues such as salting pavements, planning applications regarding patios, etc. However, how far can you go – do people have the competence?

Third sector – Participants believe this has an important role but there remains a need to have a link between funding and provision to ensure accountability.

What is the role of Local Government in this future?

There is a big opportunity for local government - More power will cascade through the system from the top but it will not necessarily lie with Local authorities. Some additional power will inevitably lie with them, however one participant said this comes with added complications, due to less money, more functions, and more information provision.

Will local government only be a service provider? – Two participants agreed that Local authorities should be a leader in the community although currently it often just does the bidding for Central government. However, another noted that local government had yet to decide its role: whether it is about services or governance. Another commented that Local authorities could also potentially fill any gaps which market based forces may leave.

Empowering people - Councils should have a role empowering and training people to run services and could provide some capacity. This is important as responsibility cannot just be 'dumped'.

How localist are the current Conservative policies?

The attendees have high hopes for localism – They hope a potential Conservative Government will

lead to cost savings, devolved decision making and improved democracy.

Performance and Assessment - They want to scrap the current assessment regime. However, one participant said there would always be a need for some kind of regulation, even if it is light touch. Another suggested that the 'Audit Commission could go back to its roots' to achieve this. One contributor suggested polling companies could do this – but another noted that there are systemic flaws with the approach and good communication techniques could further manipulate the accuracy of scores.

Directly elected mayors - One contributor suggested Mayors were a good idea – however another disagreed saying that is it about strong local leadership – which some council leaders are already offering.

Accountability concerns - Some attendees mentioned that the Conservatives planned to leave out local government in some services (e.g. schools), which could lead to accountability issues.

What should be built upon and what is missing?

Performance and assessment - Currently there is an issue of councils just 'playing the game' in respect to this and some are better than others at this. This system needs a structural change.

Total Place – One participant mentioned this was important, but could be used by people in the wrong way, so important to see conclusions.

Lack of movement - Need to improve the chain of people moving from working in local government to working within Central government. Particularly in regard to councillors.

Regional partnerships (RIEPs) – These could be a sensible approach, and should not be seen as regional governance by another name. This can lead to efficiency savings – e.g. in the South East – 'buy 10 schools – get 1 free' approach. There is the issue of accountability in such instances – one person questioned how can residents make informed decisions, particularly when different parties are working together? Another said this would depend on the nature of each arrangement.

High politics v. Low politics - There must be a

“We have reached a watershed moment, there is the opportunity to make Central government smaller”

grown up discussion with Central government about powers, finance, etc. Essentially there should be a definition of 'high politics' and what should be considered 'low politics'.

Key tensions

Accountability and power - The separation of funding and accountability for local government is an issue. Whitehall and quangos still hold too much power and local government has limited monetary raising powers. This also extends to issue of parliamentary accountability for ministers – in which systemic reform would be required for a shift in accountability. One contributor suggested elected mayors could be the answer to this.

Uniform services or local decision making? – We are now in a situation where central targets are hindering local decision making. One contributor argued the system we have now occurred because it became necessary as people dislike postcode lotteries. Others feel that this is holding localism back.

Earned autonomy v. presumed autonomy. Earned suggests good councils earn responsibilities and can be left alone. Presumed suggests that all have freedoms until mistakes are made - when they will swiftly lose powers. Example of earned could be that councils buy themselves out of business rates by paying an annual levy to central government. Another argued that councils should be allowed to sink or swim and that there should be an acknowledgement that situations such as Haringey are unavoidable under this approach.

Conclusion

There is an agreement that there is a big opportunity in the current climate and that local government should seize the day.

Localism does not necessarily mean more power to local government . It can also entail power going straight to residents.

The system should be addressed first. Local government needs to be careful that policy does not become a 'workaround' and addresses the fundamental systemic issues.

Paul Bettison concluded – "The future is good if we have the nerve to do it".

About Localis

Localis is an independent think tank dedicated to issues relating to local government and localism. We carry out innovative research, hold a calendar of events and facilitate an ever growing network of members to stimulate and challenge current orthodoxy of the governance of the UK.

For more information about Localis, please visit the Localis website at www.localis.org.uk or phone 0207 340 2660. For more information on this work please contact Tom Shakespeare on tom@localis.org.uk.

Bracknell Forest Council's vision is to make it a place where all people can thrive; living, learning and working in a clean, safe and healthy community.

For more information on Bracknell Forest Council please visit www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk or call 01344 352000.

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