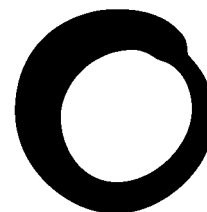


July 2010



**Friends of
the Earth**

Briefing

England's powershift: Local control rules, ok?!

This briefing is a snapshot of fast moving scenery a few months in to a cost-cutting coalition government. Events are now moving rapidly and no-one yet knows the full implications of the decisions for England's politics, power and decision making at local, regional and national levels.

The Government is intent on 'pushing power back to the local' by releasing local government from top down targets and strategic policies; it has already removed regional strategic decision-making policies, targets, strategies and bodies. Consequently, there is more confusion than clarity about how the Government's aims for climate and biodiversity restoration, land use and transport planning, environmental quality and genuine sustainable development will be delivered with certainty.

Plans for 'localism' and 'Big Society' are also hard to discern. How the dust settles will have bearing on local communities, their council and may help or hinder the sustainable development of your area.

Friends of the Earth makes life better for people by inspiring solutions to environmental problems.

We are:

- the UK's most influential national environmental campaigning organisation
- the world's most extensive environmental network, with around 2 million supporters across five continents and 77 national organisations worldwide
- a unique network of campaigning local groups, working in more than 230 communities throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland
- dependent on individuals for over 90 per cent of our income.

To join or make a donation call us on 0800 581 051

Friends of the Earth, 26-28 Underwood Street, London N1 7JQ
Tel: 020 7490 1555 Fax: 020 7490 0881 Web: www.foe.co.uk

Friends of the Earth Limited company number 1012357, Trust company number 1533942, registered charity number 281681.

LOCAL FLAVOUR FINDS FAVOUR, FOR NOW

'All politics is local'

This cliché may be truer than ever because after decades in the political backwaters local government seems to be making a comeback with politicians championing its role in:

- Helping to restore public faith in democracy;
- Involve local people in key decisions;
- Meeting public demand for high quality, locally-attuned services; and,
- Ensuring economic recovery

Historically, government talk of devolving power tends to disguise centralisation of powers. For the time being local government finds itself centre stage savouring promises of being freed from top down political diktats and targets but effectively frozen in the spotlight as the UK Coalition Government makes changes in line with its priority to cut spending.

How will local councils reconcile the rhetoric of 'localism', the role of responsive local services and need for improved democratic contact with citizens with the reality of a growing lack of strategic direction and public reactions to imposed spending cuts?

Control shift: "Returning power to local communities"

The Conservative Party's Green Paper on local power, *Control Shift*, is the touchstone for the new coalition Government's approach to localism and local decision making:

"...we want nothing less than radical decentralisation" (because) "Localism holds the key to economic, social and political success in the future...And by making local government more accountable and bringing people closer to the levers of power we can start to restore the trust that's been lost in our political system." It aims to give "people more power and control over the services that are delivered in their areas" and to give "power and financial incentives to local authorities to foster growth."¹

The Conservative Party's removal of targets is a key distinction from Labour's retention of duties on councils to meet some central targets, as it says that local councils are:

"...frustrated in their attempts to make local life better by a target-driven, top-down government which is trapped in the bureaucratic age and micro-manages all they do. Our plans for decentralising responsibility and power, set out in this paper, will trust people to manage their affairs in a way that responds to local needs."

No change: it's the economy

The thrust of this power shift remains unashamedly about boosting economic growth - as under Labour. In that sense there is little difference between the main political parties as they all regard local councils as key to securing economic and built development.

How will this dominant economic growth agenda fit with the environment and sustainable development? And what is happening to our land use planning system – the principle purpose of which is sustainable development? How will local authorities be more in touch and responsive to citizens and still act on climate and other big issues when they are focussed on spending cuts and re-structuring?

¹ The Conservative Party's *Control shift*: www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/Returning%20Power%20Local%20Communities.ashx?dl=true

The story so far: Coalition cuts, creations, clarity and confusions...

Bodies	Policies	Mechanisms	To come...
<p>Local plans + services</p> <p>Cut: Local authority leaders' boards – would have developed their region's priorities and regional strategy. Cut despite being a form of local control. May remain informally in some regions if they can be afforded.</p>	<p>Cut: Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) – uncertain how these will work in the current strategic vacuum and when councils are preoccupied with spending cuts.</p> <p>Cut: Local Area Agreements (LAA) and the National indicator set against which the Audit Commission assessed council performance (CAA).</p>	<p>Created: Local neighbourhoods to be given more ability to determine what development occurs locally, based on principles in the Tory <i>Open Source</i> planning Green Paper.</p> <p>Cut: <i>Comprehensive Area Assessment</i> (CAA) quality inspection regime of local councils.</p>	<p>Confusion? How the aim to give local people more say will stack up if councils are incentivised to permit development? (see <i>Regional economics</i> below)</p> <p>Clarity? A new inspection regime of 'Collaborative democracy and neighbourhood planning'.</p>
<p>Regional planning</p> <p>Cut: <i>Regional Assemblies</i> (RAs) – seen as undemocratic and an imposition on local decision making.</p> <p>London: the Mayor and Assembly are unaffected; Mayor has bid for and may gain more powers.</p>	<p>Cut: <i>Regional Spatial Strategies</i> (RSS) – means all statutory duties on local councils to follow strategic policies such as on land use, transport, waste, energy and housing will be lost.</p>	<p>Confusion? How will local councils deliver their contribution to the overall direction of travel on strategic planning issues if they no longer have a framework to operate within?</p>	<p>Clarity? A consolidated (i.e. shorter, 40 page less prescriptive) <i>National Planning Framework</i> for all development and national, economic, environmental and social priorities.</p>
<p>Regional economics</p> <p>Cut: <i>Regional Development Agencies</i> (RDAs) – despite their economic focus seen as a bureaucratic layer.</p> <p>Cut: <i>National Housing and Planning Advisory Unit</i>, for cost savings.</p> <p>Created: <i>Local Economic Partnerships</i> (LEPs) – councils to cooperate across borders and with business to deliver economic growth.</p>	<p>Cut: Housing targets and all policies / targets in RSS.</p> <p>Created: Duty of competence on local councils and duty on councils to consider neighbouring areas' infrastructure plans.</p>	<p>Created: <i>Regional Growth Fund</i> - £1bn for private bodies and public-private partners in 'vulnerable' regions.</p> <p>Confusion? Financial incentives for councils to permit development / housing in their area.</p>	<p>Clarity? A White Paper (due summer 2010) is to set out details of the Government's plans.</p> <p>A <i>Public Bodies Bill</i> will formally and legally abolish RAs, RDAs and other bodies.</p>
<p>National planning</p> <p>Cut: <i>Infrastructure Planning Commission</i> (IPC) replaced by <i>major Infrastructure Planning Unit</i>.</p>	<p>Cut: <i>Planning Policy Statements</i> (PPSs).</p> <p>Clarity? <i>National Policy Statements</i> (NPS) now to be subject to Parliamentary consent.</p>	<p>Confusion? The emphasis remains on 'fast-tracking' of major infrastructure projects for economic growth.</p>	<p>Clarity? <i>Nature White Paper</i> and a <i>Decentralisation & Localism Bill</i> due late 2010 / early 2011.</p>

OTHER EXAMPLES OF 'LOCALISM'

The 2007 Sustainable Communities Act

This aimed to promote the sustainability of local communities starts from the principle that local people know best what needs to be done to promote the sustainability of their area, but that sometimes they need central government to act to enable them to do so. It provides a channel for local people and the councils which represent them to ask central government to take such action.

In its coalition agreement the Government states that it will "implement the Sustainable Communities Act, so that citizens know how taxpayers' money is spent in their area and have a greater say over how it is spent".

The duty to involve

A legal requirement on local authorities since April 2009, is intended to strengthen how authorities consult and involve representatives of local people (including residents and workers), local businesses and voluntary organisations on their **Sustainable Community Strategies** usually through a **Local Strategic Partnership** (LSP)

***The future is local* - UK Sustainable Development Commission**

In one of its final reports before abolition in July 2010 the UK SDC said that neighbourhood partnerships are the best way to bring about the improvements needed to improve quality of life and safeguard towns and cities against climate change. In *The future is local* the SDC said a neighbourhood-based approach is the most cost-effective way to upgrade local infrastructure and calls on government to support 'multi-disciplinary partnerships' of communities, local authorities, infrastructure owners and financial and technical partners. Empowering communities to deliver, whether on transport or home energy initiatives would, it said, save money, strengthen communities and avoid disruption.²

The rise of core cities and city regions

For some time now England's largest cities have been regarded as economic powerhouses and the place for politicians and public allies to see economic progress.

The demand created by cities for imported human and physical resources drawn from hinterlands and 'travel to work areas' means that cities increasingly define themselves across wider areas than traditional administrative boundaries sometimes extending beyond suburbs to rural areas.

Outside London and the south east, the economic super region which is regarded by some as 'overheating' from a century of receiving the lion's share of attention and by others as able to support itself because of its advance position, the **Core Cities** have organised themselves to attract political attention.

Friends of the Earth England has worked with the Core Cities in particular to persuade city leaders to show their intention to act on big issues such as climate change alongside their undoubted primary economic focus.

² *The future is local: empowering communities to improve their neighbourhoods:*
www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications.php?id=1092

TRACKING THE CHANGES

Although it will be some time before the new UK Government completes its changes and the implications are fully seen, we have already tasted some of the effects of early changes which lead us to pose the following questions:

Immediate threats / opportunities to the land-use planning system:

- **Strategic vacuum** - With the removal of regional strategies and decision making as well as the wait for new legislation on local government, a strategic vacuum is being created and the greater the fragmentation the more likely that centralisation happens by default.
- **Uncertainty for sure** - How much we still need targets and to defend planning as a delivery mechanism? And how will central government have any certainty about what is happening in all 368 planning areas?
- **Empowerment or abandonment** - are councils being freed up to deliver or are they likely to be operating in vacuum and not acting because they are not required to – as much an issue of local government mindset as anything.
- **Certainty without imposition** - knowing what will happen without falling foul of being seen as wanting to hand on to top down, bureaucratic approaches which are out of favour with the new Government.
- **Sustainable development** – in the Conservative's *Open Source* planning green paper this is defined as meaning whatever local councils decide it is.
- **Economy first** – the coalition is continuing the previous government's view of the 'regional agenda' as being about reducing inequalities between regions – Page 9 of the coalition agreement refers to 'new business evenly shared across regions...'
- **Regulation** – the approach is to regulate as the last resort and possibly deregulate even further: the 'one in, one out' proposal suggests an interest in cutting red tape as a good in itself rather than the quality of regulation.

Climate change and local government

- How to ensure councils have the powers and responsibilities they need to play their role in tackling climate change?
- How can this be helped by better relationships between local + national government?
- What should be the role of local carbon budgets?

Localism and public influence of decision making

- How to strengthen genuine and meaningful public participation in decision making?
- What this will mean in practice not least given the public spending squeeze

Barriers to effective local government

- What barriers exist to local councils using existing powers?
- Are there other powers which councils should have?
- Which barriers are within local government control or are related to the way in which local government operates?
- How can an improved relationship between local and national government help overcome barriers (including the balance between duties and powers, finance)?
- Given trends toward deregulation including reducing the burden of inspection on local authorities, what forms of scrutiny of local government should be in place to assist transparency and action (and which might survive a change of government)?

For more information contact your England Regional Campaigner or:

Paul de Zylva, Friends of the Earth England
26-28 Underwood Street, London, N1 7JQ
paul.dezylva@foe.co.uk www.foe.co.uk/england