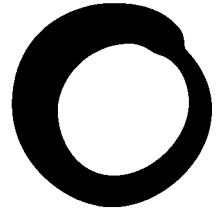


# Briefing 3



**Friends of  
the Earth**

## **England's power shift: Local control rules okay!**

### ***Power shift* briefings for local groups**

**Each briefing covers a different aspect of how politics, power and decision making at local and regional levels in England will have a bearing on your local group's work.**

Power is shifting in England. Regional Assemblies outside London have been phased out and control over strategic decisions in each region has been handed to a power-sharing partnership of the unelected, business-led Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and new Leaders' Boards representing the local authorities in each region. Regional ministers have also been appointed to oversee the new institutions.

The thrust of this power shift is unashamedly about boosting economic growth although Ministers say that the dominance of this economic growth agenda does not threaten the environment and sustainable development and that their new 'localism' is part of renewing democracy, being more responsive to citizens and acting on climate and other big issues.

**This third briefing explores the Government's proposals on *Strengthening local democracy* which is open for consultation until 2 October 2009 and which Ministers claim is "the biggest transfer of power to elected councillors for a generation."** For more information please contact either your Regional Campaigns Coordinator (RCC) or:

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## **LOCAL FLAVOUR FINDS FAVOUR**

The cliché that 'All politics is local' may be truer than ever because after decades in the political backwaters local government seems to be making a comeback. UK Governments tend to centralise powers but local government now finds itself courted by the main political parties keen to talk about 'localism', the value of local services and contact with citizens.

### **Conservative plans: "Returning power to local communities"**

In *Control Shift*, the Conservative Party's Green Paper on local power, the Party says:

"...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."<sup>1</sup>

The Conservatives' removal of targets is a key distinction from Labour's retention of duties on councils to meet some central targets, as they say 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."

### **Labour's plans: "Local government at the centre of decision making"**

The Government is consulting until 2 October on its proposals to restore public faith in democracy and help economic recovery by decentralising power, meeting public demand for high quality, locally-attuned services and gaining local action on big issues such as climate change.<sup>2</sup> The Government's thinking stems from its 2006 Local Government White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities*<sup>3</sup> and its 2007 *Governance of Britain* Green Paper<sup>4</sup> which set out plans for "re-invigorating our democracy" by improving ways for "local people to hold service providers to account" and by placing "a duty on public bodies to involve local people in major decisions." *Strong and Prosperous Communities* in particular proposed "devolving power to citizens and revitalising local democracy" by, for example:

- Giving people a **new right to an answer** from their local authorities when they demand action on any issue they want to raise through a new Community Call for Action;
- Increasing opportunities for **communities to take on the management and ownership of local assets and facilities** such as under-used community centres or empty schools;
- Encouraging **local charters between communities and service providers to set expectations of services** and how they can take action if standards are not being met;
- Adding to the power first introduced by the Local Government Act 2000 for councils to promote and improve the economic, social and environmental 'well being' of their area, by improving development and coordination of support for people, groups and councils;
- Changing the "**Best Value**" **Duty** to ensure that authorities inform, consult, involve and devolve to all citizens and communities; and,
- Strengthening **Local Area Agreements** (see *Power shift* briefing 2) to make them more flexible in responding to the needs and priorities expressed by the community.

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<sup>1</sup> The Conservative Party's *Control shift*:

[www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/Returning%20Power%20Local%20Communities.ashx?dl=true](http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/Returning%20Power%20Local%20Communities.ashx?dl=true)

<sup>2</sup> *Strengthening local democracy*: [www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1290537.pdf](http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1290537.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> *Strong and Prosperous Communities* White Paper: [www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/strongprosperous](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/strongprosperous)

<sup>4</sup> *Governance of Britain* Green Paper: [www.hmg.gov.uk/media/27749/full\\_document.pdf](http://www.hmg.gov.uk/media/27749/full_document.pdf)

## **OTHER EXAMPLES OF ‘LOCALISM’**

**The 2007 Sustainable Communities Act** which aims 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.

**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.

## **‘STRENGTHENING LOCAL DEMOCRACY’ – THE DETAILS**

As part of building trust in politics the Government wants to promote local democratic renewal in England and Ministers say their proposals to create “...**a much stronger role for local government, placing it firmly at the centre of decision making in their community**” (page 6, para 6).

Ministers say their plans are “**the biggest transfer of power to elected councillors for a generation**” (page 8, para 12) and that they want to give local government the means to address key future issues including through effective local public services:

“...public services work together, rather than individually, in the next phase of reform, delivering better services, and reducing costs.” *Page 10, para 21*

“So councils must be fully equipped with the powers they need to act decisively and effectively on behalf of their citizens: the powers and ability to scrutinise, influence and shape other services.” *Page 6, para 6*

Local government is also identified as having a key role in **addressing key challenges** of:

- People’s rising expectations of **public services**;
- The need to restore public **trust in politics** and democracy;
- The need to promote **economic recovery**; and,
- The need to adapt to the threat of **climate change**.

“Local government has a crucial part to play in addressing these challenges as their citizens’ elected representative. **We want citizens to have a real say in how these challenges are tackled, and on what happens in their communities**” such as “getting involved in local budgeting decisions, having a say in how local public services are run, taking part in petitions, or by taking over facilities for their community.” *Page 7, para 8*

Specifically, Ministers envisage a “**powerful new role for local authorities**” where they:

- Play a central role for citizens in delivering their **entitlements**, and have flexibility and autonomy in **meeting local needs**
- Take on the responsibility for responding to **emerging local challenges** – particularly climate change and housing
- Take greater responsibility for **scrutinising and oversight of public money** spent on local service delivery in an area, in order to drive improvements in services and increase value for money.

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### *Public entitlements*

The Government is venturing into setting out new entitlements (rights?) for citizens and a key question is how to define what new entitlements would support democratic renewal, scrutiny, quality services and value for money?

“Local **residents should be able to influence the shape of their area** and the services they receive.” *Page 13. Para 40*

### *Redefine efficiency*

Page 7 of the *Strengthening local democracy* consultation document refers to:

- £4.5 billion efficiency savings made by local government since 2004;
- the potential for more savings identified by the Bichard Review;
- a potential role for local government to have an overview of how all money is spent in a local authority area;

### *Cooperation for economic development*

The Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill (currently going through Parliament – see **Power shift** briefing 2) will require local government to carry out local economic assessments of their area. The Bill also creates the means for local councils to cooperate across sub-regions (by forming Multi Area Agreements, MAAs) and to set up *Economic Prosperity Boards* as distinct bodies with an economic focus. It remains to be seen how local authorities' new emphasis on economic development will sit with promises by Ministers to move toward environmentally sustainable, low carbon economies which respect environmental limits.

### *Local councillors*

Ministers see local councillors as becoming a **local point of accountability**: “the place where citizens can go to question how public money is being spent, how decisions are being made and how services are being delivered.” *Page 9, para 17*

## Key questions

### *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)?

### *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?

### *Public influence of decision making*

How to use the consultation to identify where public participation in decision making is, perhaps, going in the opposite direction to the stated intention of the *Strengthening local democracy* paper?