Bridging the regional policy gap: localism vs. strategic planning in rural England

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Abstract

The election of a centre-right coalition government in May 2010 in the UK started a radical process of decentralisation and a move to local decision-making in English planning. The newly published 'Decentralisation and Localism' Bill includes the abolition of the strategic tier of planning, the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS), and the consequent refocusing of planning practice to the micro (community) scale.

The aims of the new Government include achieving greater community empowerment and consequent engagement with the planning system, continuing the broad policy trend of the recent past. This approach is broadly endorsed by planning practitioners, and their representative bodies (RTPI, TCPA). However, the abolition of RSS, and other regional strategies and strategy making bodies, is a clear break with previous governments, and something which has been greeted with dismay by many of those involved in the English planning system. There are fears that without the 'stick' of regional policy, there are insufficient 'carrots' within the existing or proposed structures of planning to incentivise local communities to accept potentially controversial or unpopular, but valuable/needed forms of development.

This paper will assess the potential impacts of localism on the delivery of housing in rural areas and the development of landscape scale environmental projects. By assessing how the abolition of the regional planning tier in England might affect the delivery of socially/environmentally/economically important outputs, the paper will address issues of the local versus the strategic. Two case studies of very different scales will be drawn upon to provide empirical evidence for this discussion: Firstly, the 'Wicken Fen Vision' project in Cambridgeshire, an example of a large-scale (22 square miles) and long-term (100 years) environmental planning project that seeks to create a new green infrastructure resource; Secondly, data will be drawn from two projects exploring small scale rural housing provision in different English regions. These two case studies will be used to present different perspectives on the 'gap' created by the forthcoming abolition of regional planning in England, and thereby seek to understand the implications of the Decentralisation and Localism Bill.

By addressing the narratives presented by the National Trust (proponents of the Wicken Fen Vision), local opponents of the proposal, and the responses of the local planning authority and media a narrative of separation can be identified. Similarly, contrasting views of housing associations, local authorities and local residents who have expressed support and opposition to housing developments in their communities demonstrate radically different perspectives on development and resistance/opposition to it. The paper concludes that the localism agenda offers potentially offers a fundamental change in relationship between government/governance agencies and the communities they represent, and a restructuring of engagement with the policies that influence local land management and development. However, the transition to localism creates risks that existing governance structures may not be fully equipped to deal with, including a) the management of expectations/aspirations of local communities, b) the difficulty in facilitating thoughtful and insightful debate on important issues; and c) the 'democratic deficit', i.e. the balancing of the interests of a minority campaign groups with the broader needs of a local area, its wider region and the nation as a whole.

Key words: Localism, conservation, housing, local engagement, planning policy,

Introduction: 'Localism' and the 'Big Society'

The new Government has pledged to devolve power to local communities across a range of policy areas, including planning, promising to introduce 'powerful new incentives for local people so they support [development] in the right places and receive direct rewards from the proceeds of growth to improve their local area' (DCLG, 2010b). The full repercussions of this policy dictum have not yet been seen, but the move to install a localist approach to governance and create what the Government is calling a 'Big Society' is central to this change. The Coalition's commitment will transform the process of planning for housing and landscape in England.

There are various components to the proposed policy shift, most outlined in the *Localism and Decentralisation* Bill, introduced to the UK Parliament in December 2010, and now making its way through the Byzantine democratic systems through which new legislation must pass. One of the core messages in the Bill, and the key proposal which this paper will focus on is that of providing local communities with more influence in the process of approving or rejecting developments of any kind in their local communities, with a greater emphasis placed on their views within planning decision-making. Two key rhetorical justifications for this approach are that it is more 'democratic' (a claim which will be explored in more detail below); and that communities/neighbourhoods understand their own areas/needs much better than local authorities can do, and are hence better able to make decisions which may have direct effects upon them.

This paper will explore the validity of these claims, using evidence from two policy fields – landscape planning and planning for housing. It will then use this evidence to more broadly consider the following questions:

- How will placing greater power or input in the hands of local people impact on planning decisions? Will it have a more proactive effect on engagement or will it lead to a more powerful lobby for resistance?
- What added value might local authority planners and communities see with the promotion of localism?
- Has the lack of access or engagement with local decision-making decreased the democratic process by marginalising local opinion?
- How can a localist agenda reconcile the disparity between engagement and political decision-making?

The dilemma of the localist approach lies in its application. By proposing a system whereby local people have a greater say in government the role of strategic needs assessments (for housing, biodiversity, etc) is reduced. This has been compounded further with the revocation of regional economic targets proposed in RSSs and Regional Economic Strategies (RESs). Regional or county projections have thus been withdrawn and new targets need to be identified by the relevant Local Planning Authority (LPA) or the newly established Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). This process has been mirrored in policy proposed by the RSPB, the Environment Agency and Natural England. Such proposals have faced, in their view, a disproportionate level of opposition despite the long term gains of landscape scale biodiversity and conservation projects (Natural England, 2009). Opposition to such developments has concentrated on perceived misunderstandings of central government landuse determinations rather than a Locally Understood Land-Use (LULU) approach to landscape management that protects resources in line with local assessments.

In terms of planning for housing, the Localism and Decentralisation Bill enacts the Government's promise to give 'groups of local people the power to deliver the development that their local community wants, with minimal red tape' (DCLG, 2010a), by proposing a new *Community Right to Build* (if more than 50% of the community agree), along with a *New Homes Bonus*, a financial incentive to encourage local authorities to grant planning permission for new housing. These new powers are intended to act as a 'bottom-up' replacement for 'top-down' housing targets in regional spatial strategies. There have been criticisms that the new approach 'is a farrago [that] enfranchises nimbys, who are given a veto on housing development' (Walker, 2010); and initial evidence, in the form of local authorities immediately reducing housing targets following the revocation of regional spatial strategies (see further discussion below) is perhaps not inspiring.

To explore more rigorously arguments around the likely impacts of localism this paper will bring together two sources of empirical data related to these two policy fields: firstly from an assessment of the opposition to the National Trust's Wicken Fen Vision in Cambridgeshire; and secondly from two projects exploring the reactions to proposed small-scale housing developments in different regions of rural England. A comparison is presented to highlight where differences and similarities appear in rhetoric around resistance to development, and how the policy framework of the Decentralisation and Localism Bill will impact on this process in the future. The paper analyses resistance to development, and questions whether the proposed twin-track approach to local decision-making and county-led planning is a realistic or desirable way to move forward.

The Localism Agenda

> '[Localism] means giving people the power and funding to deliver what they want for their communities – with a particular determination to help those who need it most. And it means doing what previous governments have not dared: reforming the excessively centralised tax system which stifles local autonomy and innovation'
>
> (Nick Clegg, Deputy Prime Minister, in HM Government, 2010, p. 2)

The comments of Mr Clegg suggest a wholesale change in the approach taken in the planning and management of our environment is being brought forward through the localism agenda. The move to provide greater power to local people is central if the development of an inclusive and 'Big Society' is to succeed. In their guide to the Decentralisation Bill HM Government and Mr Clegg outlined the fundamental principles they feel the 'Localism Bill' will be built upon. These are:

    a.   Lifting the burden of bureaucracy;
    b.   Empower communities to do things their way;
    c.   Increase local control of public finance;
    d.   Diversify the supply of public services;
    e.   Open up Government to public scrutiny; and
    f.   Strengthen accountability to local people.

(HM Government, 2010, p. 3)

These principles are in themselves hard to disagree with – for example, who would not want to empower communities? Each of these ideas could enable local people to engage more directly, and with a greater level of confidence, in the governance of their community than under the current local authority led system. However, it may not be that straightforward. Although localism as a trend receives broad

support across the political spectrum in the UK, it is not without its critics. It is worthwhile therefore to consider some different perspectives on localism and the decentralisation of power.

It has been suggested that localism can be seen as a reaction against Keynesian 'top-down and state-driven development' (Rodriguez-Pose & Sandall, 2008, p. 68). Those advocating such an approach claim that it will help bridge the 'ever-widening gap between citizens, the politicians who make decisions on their behalf and the institutions in which they operate' (Parvin, 2009, p. 351) – very similar justification to that cited above.

Rodriguez-Pose and Sandall (2008) explored decentralisation as a trend and a discourse. They identified three forms of decentralising discourse:

1) Identity: the discourse of minorities. This promotes the value of 'preserving and promoting cultural identity' (pg. 56).
2) Good governance: the democratic discourse. This is a powerful discourse in part because it is popular with both the right and the left, and because 'it is self-evidently almost impossible to challenge the value of 'good' governance' (pg. 57).
3) Efficiency: the economic discourse. Decentralisation leads to 'higher economic dynamism, adaptability to change, innovation' (pg.58)

The second of these appears to be the main driver behind Government's rhetorical shift towards localism – the Localism Bill is part of their broader stated commitment to 'distribute power and opportunity to people' (H M Government, 2010). The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition are not alone in making this kind of statement – Angela Eagle, a former Labour Minister and now Shadow Treasury Minister, has argued that '[o]ur goal must be one of deepening democracy, achieving 'bottom-up' social and political change that mobilises the experience and commitment of activists and citizens' (Eagle, 2003, p. 2).

Rodriguez-Pose and Sandall attempted to clarify why decentralisation/localism is so broadly popular: 'in terms of leftist politics, the democratic discourse and the community have replaced the discourse of equality and the redistributive state. On the right, the interests of capital are now perceived to be better represented by spatial flexibility rather than by a strong nation-state' (Rodriguez-Pose & Sandall, 2008, p. 69).

There are, though, theoretical risks with localism, amongst them its inherent assumption that a sufficient proportion of local communities will engage in decision making processes to make them legitimate. Allen (2006) questioned whether this would be the case. She noted that cooperatives and mutualism in general are used as demonstrations of a history of localism – '[m]embership organisations based in local communities are seen as a revival of 19th century welfare initiatives. Unfortunately, the historical evidence does not support this view...the history of the co-operative movement and recent experience of mutual organisations such as building societies, also demonstrate that most members will not be active' (Allen, 2006, p. 248). Alternatively, the patronage shown by philanthropists in respect to the development of green development policies (i.e. Garden Cities and Greenways) highlights a somewhat different manner (Hall, 2002; Herrington, 2009).

If most of the members of a community are not active in decisions affecting that community, the risk is that significant decisions could be made by a minority of the community. Further, as noted by Parvin, top-down approaches (assuming a relatively benign central government) protect 'minority groups from the tyranny of the majority' (Parvin, 2009, p. 353), which he argued localism does not. He went on to say that

'what is right or wrong may not always be consistent with what *the local community thinks* [emphasis in original] is right or wrong' (Parvin, 2009, p. 355).

To combat the risk of the issues identified by Parvin there may be a need for more than simple devolution of decisions – arguably the principles behind the planning process would need to change, perhaps in line with the ideas of communicative/collaborative planning. How this is achieved over the lifespan of the coalition's localism agenda is open to interpretation and the full effects may not be known until well into the next parliament.

The challenge faced by the coalition government will therefore be to modify to the greatest extent in a generation the manner in which people engage with planning, and subsequently shape how decision-making occurs in England. According to recent CABE Space research this situation will provide positive opportunities for local knowledge to shape the way in which places are developed. CABE Space stated that '[the] community is best placed to know the specific needs and priorities for their neighbourhood's green space, and local people can play a central role in driving the improvements they need' (CABE Space, 2010). Whilst providing the mechanism for engagement has been described by Healey (2006) as being central to achieving 'collaborative' planning, the potential risks identified by Parvin and others illustrate the risks in this approach.

Recent test cases regarding changes of land use for housing support this view, arguing that European Protected Species legislation is not being applied correctly by LPAs (Simpson, 2010b). This suggests that if professional planners are unsure of how to apply derogation tests then local communities may be equally, or more, vulnerable in failing to meet legislative considerations. As a consequence legal challenges may increase as specialists attempt to raise objections to decisions made by local committees or Parish Councils (Gallent et al., 2009). Localism may therefore provide the framework for a shift in the power relationship between planning applications, the LPA and the decisions being made (Simpson, 2010b), but it potentially flawed if the implementation of the framework becomes untenable. Natural England though predicts that landscape professionals and communities will meet the challenges of localism head on and adapt their current planning frameworks accordingly (Kirby, 2011). They propose that groups are well equipped to do more with less and that localism will only serve to refocus what their primary development goals are.

Of particular concern to us is the issue of the capacity of communities and neighbourhoods to incorporate strategic considerations in their decision making – if there is a lack of sufficient expertise/experience (in policy terms) then decisions may be reached that do not protect the needs of an environment or the local population.

However, press releases and documentation released by agencies including Natural England and the RTPI (07/12/2010) suggest that although issues relating to the implementation of localism have been raised, they are approaching the Decentralisation Bill positively. As such the RTPI stated:

> 'The RTPI fully supports the principles of localism. Democratic accountability has been at the heart of planning for over 60 years, and direct public engagement for over 40. Planning and planners have a duty to all those involved in, and affected by, planning to meet their needs and aspirations, balanced with meeting social and economic objectives while protecting our built and natural heritage' (Royal Town Planning Institute, 2010).

The drivers of resistance to development

In many (particularly rural) areas of England local resistance to change has been a feature of the governance landscape for some years. Opposition to asylum centres, protests against changes in agricultural subsidies, the banning of blood sports and changes in the physical and social infrastructure of rural location have all received major coverage (Hubbard, 2005; Milbourne, 2003). One interpretation of these campaigns, and to some extent one of the reasons behind the success of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), has been that those who have the knowledge, experience and financial backing can effect change more readily than those without (Reed, 2008). This process has become increasingly true in rural communities in England. Conversely, it has been argued that those people who are not land owners, long term residents or are not part of the vocal minority may not have as great an influence in local politics because they are not as well versed in the process of campaigning or opposition (Skidmore et al., 2006; Vigar et al., 2000). The rise of the NIMBY and more latterly the BANANA (Build Absolutely Nothing, Anywhere, Near Anything) campaigns witnessed in rural England has therefore seen a stark rise in the breadth of opposition and a growing depth of feeling that local people have little say in how their towns and villages are shaped (Clark et al., 2007; Selman, 2000).

More recently opposition to housing, transport and renewable energy infrastructure has once again been brought to the forefront of rural campaigning (Milbourne, 2003). The current debate over High Speed Rail II is one such issue. Balancing the needs for an increased number of more affordable rural homes, improvements in road and rail infrastructure and meeting the energy needs of England has brought the level of opposition into sharper focus (Haggett, 2011). However, although we have moved on from the stereotypes of NIMBYs seen in the 1980's and 1990's (Wolsink, 2006), a number of characteristics are still apparent in CPRE campaigns and those presented in the evaluations of opposition to The Wicken Fen Vision.

A more dynamic and fluid approach to campaigning is now apparent in the UK, where the use of electronic and social media has overtaken more traditional avenues of protest. The experience and education of some protest groups have been more successful in obtaining coverage due to their ability to key into such media (Reed, 2008). The political argument of Us vs. Them and the Town vs. Country is, therefore, very much alive in relation to the development of rural England. Where, *'we'* or *'us'*, are trying to protect the landscape from devastation i.e. development and *'they'* or *'them'* are the developers and LPAs who are attempting to alter the fundamental characteristics or Englishness of the local environment (van der Horst, 2007).

Whilst the nature of opposition may remain grounded in a number of same arguments presented since the term NIMBY became popular, the manner in which it is reported has been more fluid in its nature (Abram, 2009). Evidence from the Ely Country Park consultation highlighted this process showing how local opposition to development existed prior to the consultation. As a consequence comments were received that did not reflect the project plans and led local respondents to offer predetermined views. As a result of a series of misunderstandings and rumours the results of the consultation process was skewed by a vocal minority who had the knowledge and experience of coordinating a social protest against a development. These led to disparities in what was perceived as allowable development which hindered the overall planning process.

Characteristics of objectors

Commentators have suggested a number of characteristics of those who object to new housing development in rural areas:

- Owner occupiers (who wish to see the value of their property maintained, so object to new housing which may affect property prices)
- Relative incomers (people who have not lived all their lives in the countryside, rather have moved into a village recently)
- Pastoralists (who live in the countryside for "lifestyle" reasons and are opposed to future development which may change the characteristics of their village)

(Milbourne, 1997; Shucksmith et al., 1993)

Milbourne (1997), informed by previous work by Shucksmith (1993, 1995) carried out a case study of rural Wales to assess the extent to which different "housing classes" existed – whether those who were property owners really exhibited radically different attitudes to those who were not. He sent out questionnaires to find out if people were opposed to or supported new housing development. He found that about 50% of all householders (across all groups) who responded to questionnaires were opposed to new housebuilding. Social housing residents were less opposed than owner-occupiers, but not significantly, and only among private rented residents was a clear majority in favour of it. He found less opposition to new housing development amongst younger residents, but explicitly did not find that length of time resident in an area was a differential factor. He concluded from his case studies that there are lifestyle-based rather than simply tenure-based trends in opposition to new housing, and that assuming that people's ownership or not of a home was a major factor in their propensity to oppose development was too simplistic (Milbourne, 1997).

The review above has outlined a number of characteristics of NIMBYs, development objectors and the role of localism in the promotion of a micro-scale approach to planning. The following two sections will review how this process of local engagement and negotiation has affected the development of rural housing and the expansion of the Wicken Fen Vision. These are both areas that have been subjected to sustained opposition from local communities despite their links with local and regional planning objectives.

The Wicken Fen Vision

The Wicken Fen Vision in Cambridgeshire represents a current project facing local opposition to the attainment of its long-term planning objectives. The one hundred year 'vision' covers an area of approximately 22 square miles, the majority of which is currently designated as agricultural land. The area lies within the rural landscape of Cambridgeshire. A small number of villages (population under 500) are located across the vision area. The agricultural nature of the landscape is further embedded by the pattern of land holdings, many of which are controlled by a small number of tenured farming businesses or land owners. The Vision area is located close to two large centres of population in Cambridge and Newmarket and the largest settlement in East Cambridgeshire, Ely. The perceived benefits and impacts of Wicken Fen can be seen in Table 1.

Local and regional strategic plans identified Wicken Fen as one of the most crucial projects in Cambridgeshire tackling climate change, strategic flood management and biodiversity conservation. The now revoked East of England regional spatial strategy discussed the project in policy Section ENV1: Green Infrastructure (GOEoE/EERA, 2008). The first Cambridgeshire Green Infrastructure Strategy (Cambridgeshire Horizons, 2006) and the local authority local development framework (East Cambridgeshire District Council, 2009) also both highlighted the projects strategic role in sustainably managing the landscape of Cambridgeshire. Natural England have also suggested that green infrastructure, especially in terms of landscape scale projects can be seen as holding a transformational

capacity that enables landscapes to be adapted and meet economic as well as ecological needs (Natural England, 2009). However, there has been widespread support of the project this has not led to a wider acceptance of its value in some members of the local community.

Table 1. Perceived positive and negative impacts of the Wicken Fen Vision, and the organisations espousing them

Positive Impacts of the Wicken Fen Vision	Supporting organisations	Negative Impacts of the Wicken Fen Vision	Supporting Organisations
- Climate change mitigation - Biodiversity & Conservation - Flood management - Improved access and connectivity - Alternative farming - Scientific research - Increased income for local business	- National Trust - English Heritage - Environment Agency - Natural England - Cambridgeshire Horizons - South Cambs DC - Cambridgeshire CC - Local Conservation groups	- Removal of land from production - Increased flood risk - Decreased food security - Loss of livelihood	- Local opposition groups - Parish and District councillors

Since its first inception in 1999 the land holdings acquired by The National Trust has increased as a number of local farmers and land owners have worked closely with the long-term aspirations of the project. Although still proportionally small in size compared to the overall area of the vision (5500 hectares), the land accumulation of The National Trust has enabled a number of conservation, biodiversity and access projects to be implemented and completed.

Running parallel with these developments has been a campaign led by a local resident to stop progress on the Wicken Fen Vision[2] to maintain the productive value of the area. This campaign has focussed on the perceived illogical nature of returning agricultural land to its former state as wet or semi-wet fen. This argument is compounded in the local media by the proposed loss of economic returns associated with removing land from production and the subsequent impacts on food security, flood management and community safety *(REFS FROM LOCAL PAPER TO BE ADDED HERE)*.

The primacy of the 'Wicken' debate with local communities highlights one of the main issues with the development of such a project, namely, the differences in micro-scale views of livelihood sustainability in the short-medium term and the strategic landscape scale and longer term impacts of change. With the development of the Decentralisation Bill a localist approach to decision-making based on local access and engagement will provide a new platform for these debates to become informed further by discrete local views. This may simultaneously decrease the power of LPA's and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to implement such projects given the refocusing of decision-making to a community level.

To date the LPA responsible for Wicken Fen, East Cambridgeshire District Council (ECDC), has been central to this fragmented debate. ECDC has attempted to balance the process of upholding planning legislation with the management of local opposition. As a consequence the relationship between LPA officers, the National Trust and local communities needs to be treated as a careful balancing act of negotiation and compromise if progress is to be made.

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[2] Regular correspondence and newspaper articles attributed to the leader of the opposition campaign consistently label the project 'the so-called Wicken Fen Vision'.

Due to the fragmented nature of support for the Wicken Fen Vision district level decision-making has resulted in an impasse with some Conservative councillors looking unfavourably on the project, whilst members of the Liberal Democrats group have championed it. Unfortunately the lack of official support from the LPA for the Wicken Fen Vision has placed it in an unusual and difficult policy position. The project is one of the most high profile conservation projects in England. However, because the LPA has abstained or withdrawn its support for the project it cannot be promoted by the LPA or used to meet its strategic sustainability targets. In effect the pressure elicited by local opposition on member decisions fulfils a number of the objectives of decentralisation and localism. However, the disproportionate voice of this opposition compared to supporters of Wicken Fen within the member decision-making process highlights the possible flaw in its implementation.

Assessing the impact of localism on the Wicken Fen Vision

The Wicken Fen Vision has proven to be a good example of the issues associated with localism. Within the local Cambridgeshire media (print and radio) two vocal camps have developed; one for and one against the Vision. It is, however, clear that both opinions use data and information available from national organisations including Natural England, Defra, the National Farmers Union and the Wildlife Trust to promote their rhetoric. Consequently, the arguments presented in local media appear formulaic; scientific data is supplemented with local opinion to blur the activities of the National Trust. The National Trust has, however, presented similar information proposing only the positive attributes of the project. Within these debates both the positive and negative benefits of the Wicken project can be seen. However, due to the entrenched 'us vs. them' stance of opposition and promotion it has proven difficult to rationally debate the true ecological, economic and social value of the Wicken Fen area.

The process of engagement between the opposition to Wicken Fen and the LPA is also relatively clear. A number of District Councillors work or have a history in agriculture and have adopted the opposition view of Wicken Fen based on an economic platform. This is further exacerbated by the links between councillors and local level governance, the County Council and the strategic planning of the area. Pressure to oppose the Wicken Fen Vision has manifested itself in the District Council's decision to withhold support for the project. In practice democratic opposition i.e. undertaken through formal committees has used legislation and technical reasoning to withhold support for the project. Moreover, the elected officials of the Strategic Development Committee at ECDC have asked for the National Trust to undertake a proportionally longer process of public consultation compared to other major developments in order to justify these delays.

Table 2 summarises these discussions by presenting contrasting approaches to the Wicken Fen – the localist approach privileges, unsurprisingly, local perspectives which may appear parochial in nature; whilst the strategic approach emphasises what might be called broader ecologically-driven benefits.

Table 2. The localist vs. the strategic approach to Wicken Fen Vision

	Opposition Groups	LPA
Localist approach to Wicken Fen Vision	- Use of negative rhetoric of 'so called Wicken Fen Vision' - 'Illogical' removal of land from production - % of land in WFV area that is Grade 1/A agricultural land - Potential economic impact on area - Danger to food security *Sources: Local media – letters pages, editorials, news coverage*	- No formal support for the project due to local opposition - Calls for further consultation with 'local communities' - Promotion of local forums for discussions (i.e. neighbourhood panels) but with no clear discussion agenda - Member decisions may or may not be based on local thoughts
	National Trust	**Wicken Fen Supporters**
Regional or national approach to Wicken Fen	- Increased access and engagement with the landscape - Mixed landuse to promote sustainability - Biological diversity	- Increased environmental sustainability - Increased diversity of species within the Wicken Fen area - Increased access and engagement with the landscape - Long-term legacy of environmental management - Promotion of scientific research and data collection - Economic development and the promotion of East Cambridgeshire as a tourist destination

Rural Housing

For 30 years or more there has been a disparity between the levels of need and demand for (affordable) housing in rural England and the delivery thereof through the planning system (CRC, 2010; Shucksmith, 1981). There has been a substantial body of ongoing research into this disparity (See Gallent et al., 2010 for a review of much of this research), exploring different dimensions of the problem and suggesting various solutions thereto. Some have advocated a greater role for small-scale community-led housing schemes (for example Taylor, 2008), but there is very little, if any, research presenting the case for the abolition of strategic planning. It is, therefore, difficult to predict with any certainty what will be the overall impact of the Government's proposals. It is though possible to draw on some existing research into the rural housing question to make some tentative hypotheses; this section of the paper will do just that.

The local authority response

A key rhetorical justification for the Government's attempted revocation and planned abolition of regional plans is that they were 'Soviet tractor style top-down planning targets' (DCLG, 2010b) which generated opposition from councils and communities, as they required local authorities to plan for more housing than they, or their populace, wished to accommodate. The initial evidence, in the form of local authorities amending their housing targets to reflect the removal of the 'stick' of regional planning, indicates that there is some validity to this point of view. Research by Tetlow King Planning on behalf of the National Housing Federation and the BBC indicates that over 200,000 homes had been cut from local planning

targets in the months following the coalition's announcements, principally in the greater South East (National Housing Federation, 2010; Simpson, 2010a).

However, outside the South East of England, the picture may be very different. Research at Newcastle University of the process of planning for housing in rural England illustrated that many local authorities had been arguing for *higher* housing targets in RSS than were eventually ascribed to them (Sturzaker, 2010). This supports previous research by Three Dragons, on behalf of the Commission for Rural Communities, which found that the rural content of most regional spatial strategies was poorly developed (Three Dragons, 2007). It is feasible then, that for some rural local authorities, the abolition of RSS will allow them to increase their housing targets, in an attempt to meet the high levels of need and demand they face.

The community response

Of course, in addition to the removal of regional planning, the Localism Bill proposes a much greater degree of community planning – so in theory local authorities, instead of responding to guidance from above, will have to respond to drivers from below. The arena for debate over housing targets has, then, perhaps moved from the regional to the local and community level. How communities will respond to this shift is key to the likely outcomes of the new system. There is no doubt that opposition to housing in many communities has been evident for some years, but the extent to which this is due to, as the Government claim, resentment at top-down planning is unclear. What is clear is that localism is already resulting in plans being amended (Simpson, 2010a) and proposals being refused – the developer CALA Homes has been challenging the revocation of RSS through the courts, as a result of their planning application for a large housing development near Winchester being refused, partly on the grounds of RSS abolition.

Predicting the response from communities to the sudden decentralisation of power not straightforward – the likelihood is that the response will vary dramatically between areas, reflecting the intensely variable context at the community level. That variability is central to the Government's justification for their proposals. As the Localism Bill proposes a fundamental re-shaping of the system for planning for housing, there is no direct experience that can be called upon to infer the likely pattern of variability. It is, though, possible to draw on research which examines the behaviour of local communities when faced with proposals for housing schemes, which can be described as more or less 'community-driven. Two recent research projects undertaken by Newcastle University and the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) have involved in-depth interviews with key actors involved in the process of planning for housing in a range of local authorities and villages across rural England.

Project 1 was undertaken at Newcastle University via an ESRC CASE Studentship (ref PTA-033-2005-00003), co-funded by the CRC. This featured interviews in 10 villages across five local authorities. Project 2 was undertaken jointly by Newcastle University and the CRC, and featured interviews in four villages across three local authorities. There was some overlap between the villages and local authorities studied, as Figure 1 illustrates. However, out of the 53 interviews undertaken across the projects (34 and 19 respectively), only four interviewees were common to both projects. Those interviewed included local authority planning and housing officers; representatives of housing associations active in the area and/or promoting schemes in the villages studied; rural housing enablers; and, crucially, community representatives, in the form of parish council chairmen & clerks and local residents who supported and/or opposed specific housing schemes in their villages. These latter interviews with community representatives will be the focus of the analysis below, supported by interviews with other stakeholders as necessary.

There are four themes recurring through the interviews which are pertinent to this paper, and relate to the policy and academic literature discussed thus far: Evidence that top-down decision-making causes irritation/resentment; the level of willingness in different communities to get involved in planning; the difficulties faced by local communities in balancing local and strategic considerations (and the conflict which can result from this); and examples of the benefits which can emerge from successful community planning. These four themes are discussed below. As many of the issues discussed are very contentious, we have anonymised the interviewees in most cases. To demonstrate the diversity of areas covered by interview responses, we have labelled the local authorities as A, B, C, D and E, and parish councils as 1, 2, 3, etc.

Figure 1. The case study locations – Red circles indicate project 1, blue circles project 2 and purple circles projects 1 and 2

Opposition to top-down decision-making

Several of the interviewees expressed negative views about the process of decision-making in planning for housing in general and in terms of specific schemes in their villages, ranging from irritation to resentment. One interviewee from parish council 1 in local authority A was resigned to their community being 'at the back of the queue' for resources given the attention being paid to a large urban extension project in the local authority at the time: 'I get the distinct impression that the planning department is under huge pressure – because of the XXXX development, I think a lot of energies are going towards that, and I'm not sure how that's going to impact on the rest of [the local authority]. Certainly in terms of our local plan, I think we're being pushed back... [the main town in the district] have got priority, and we're at the back! It is a problem, because there are issues other than housing that we want to resolve, and it's difficult to get on the radar at the moment. We always feared that this would be the case with XXXX, being such a massive project, that it would take a lot of resources'.

Most of the resentment, however, was not related to resources but more that the local community was keen to make decisions on various aspects of their future, yet did not have the power or responsibility to do so.

In parish council 1 in local authority B the parish council, working in tandem with a housing association, had progressed an affordable housing scheme to the stage of a planning application, when the local district councillor changed their stance on the proposal, which led to the application being refused. The parish council were intensely irritated by this – 'I think politics comes into these things... when Councillors start interfering with things – they're awkward. They're inclined to go with the flow. I had a meeting with our local district councillor and said "you're meant to be representing the parish, you're meant to be liaising with us, you don't just go with the flow of the opposition without coming to us and telling us why you've changed your tack"'.

The chairman of parish council 2 in the same local authority took issue with the process of parish planning, the now well established route for communities to plan their area – but, crucially, these parish plans are not usually adopted by local authorities as part of the development plan. This puzzled this interviewee:

> What good is a parish plan if [the local authority] take no notice of it? Because they don't! That's fact. We had a meeting about the LDF, and XXXX, who's the representative of the Community Council, actually stood up and asked the question of the Chief Planning Officer "are you going to take any notice of them?" He says "well, you can lodge a copy with us". You know. I think it's been set up all wrong by the fact that Defra fund these parish plans up to £3,000 a parish, but they haven't pre-arranged it with planning departments that they will sort of use it as a tool towards making decisions.

Resentment at top-down decision making can take various forms. In parish 3 of the same local authority, both the parish council representative and a local resident who had opposed the (eventually successful) planning application for an affordable housing scheme were unhappy with the chosen site:

> It should be noted that the site approved by the Local Authority was not the preferred site of the parish council, which would have been acceptable to the opposition group (parish council representative).

> Once the site had been selected we weren't happy as we couldn't understand the preferred site above that near the Lamb Inn which seemed more appropriate... we still feel this is the wrong site and have made strong representations on issues such as access, increased traffic, loss of heritage hedgerows, drainage... we don't believe the process was objective. The Council has claimed that the preferred site was the only site suitable and we believe the decision was already made before the application was submitted (local resident in opposition).

In Long Compton, one of the communities studied in Stratford-on-Avon District, the community had been at the vanguard of the 'Local Choice Initiative' – the local authority had adopted a policy whereby if the community in an area supported a housing scheme, the presumption was that it would receive planning permission. This is similar to the Government's 'Community Right to Build', so is a particularly useful example for us. A local resident in Long Compton was particularly enthusiastic about this approach:

> I think that communities like ours want to be masters of our own destiny, rather than having solutions imposed on us. The delivery of the kind of affordable housing that we've been talking about makes us the masters of our own destiny, rather than being told by diktat that we have to do it... I think we need to take the initiative, rather than having an outcome placed on us.

But how common is this enthusiasm for community planning at this community level?

A willingness to get involved

It would be fair to describe the level of willingness to get involved in community planning as very variable – some of the interviewees saw themselves as one of very few active community members:

> Interviewer: It sounds like it's needed a lot of blood, sweat and tears from people in the village to get it done?
> Parish council 1 representative, local authority C: Yes, a lot. A lot! It's been hard work over a lot of years... The whole process would have been a nightmare if it hadn't been for the fact that at the time we had a full set of councillors. I was chairman of the parish, I was one of the ward members, and our local county councillor lives three doors down. That has been crucial in the fact that it was something we didn't let drop.

> It's a lovely village, they've a wonderful community spirit in general, but it's like most villages, they'll only be 25% of the people, maybe 35% here, that are interested in what goes on in the village. Most people just come to live here and work elsewhere, shut their doors on a night. Particularly if you've got 65% retired people living in the village (parish council 2 representative, local authority B).

But in other areas there was a greater spread of individuals prepared to get involved in planning their community - the interviewees recognised that this was perhaps unusual, and was a powerful reason for their success in getting things done:

> I mean, we are a classic case, because we're an efficient village, we're full of people who can do this sort of thing. We've had a village plan for years, we had a village questionnaire in 2003. The village then stumped up to have it analysed properly by XXXX University... Well, I've been conceited – I think this parish council, in getting someone like me has been very lucky. I know nothing about planning – but... I've had big responsibilities in my time... so I've had a lot of experience in administration (parish council 2 representative, local authority A).

> Interviewer: Presumably it all hinges on having parish councillors who are active and happy to get involved? It takes up a lot of your time.
> Parish council 2 representative, local authority C: Not just the parish councillors – you certainly need that, but on the periphery around there were people in the village active to make sure this happened. When we said we wanted to fill the posts of housing liaison officer, we had various names who we thought were suitable people, and as soon as we asked them – "oh, yes please, I'd be delighted"!

A parish council representative in one village from local authority C saw a reliance on community involvement as a good thing (the Government's Big Society in action, perhaps):

> Interviewer: Are you a bit concerned about that reliance on people [to run a community public transport system]?
> Parish council 3 representative, local authority C: No I'm not, because it's the best thing that can happen to a place – it makes for a community. I think it was all provided by a body, it wouldn't have the local feel, and I think it would take a lot of the community spirit out of the village.

Conversely, and specifically in regard to Community Land Trusts, a legal mechanism for communities to buy and develop land for 'community benefit' which successive governments have endorsed, parish council 2 representative from local authority A (who identified the strong institutional capacity within their village above), was extremely sceptical about getting involved:

> I didn't recommend [a Community Land Trust] for this place, because... you'd have to find trustees. All of the people who I thought might be trustees who I talked to privately said – "I'm now in my seventies, if you think I'm going to be a trustee for something like this, I could lose my house and everything else if we suddenly ran into a load of bad debt or whatever else"... One of the problems with this type of arrangement is if you get a lot of bad debt, or people just don't pay their rent, the trustees are the people who carry the can financially. We have two down from me a man with a CBE who was a very successful trust lawyer, who has dealt with some large, massive trusts, some for other countries, and he is saying to all his lawyer friends – "take it from me, don't touch this with a bargepole".

It seems clear that there is far from a universal pattern of willingness/capacity in local communities to take on a more active role in planning.

Local vs. strategic considerations and conflict

Some commentators have expressed a concern that giving local communities more power to determine the level of development that occurs in their village/neighbourhood will result in 'NIMBYism', and a refusal to accommodate development that has any form of negative impact on the immediate local environment (O'Connor, 2010; Walker, 2010). The interviews carried out indicate that in some cases it appears this may be true. It was rare for local community representatives themselves to mention NIMBYism, but it was certainly the case that other stakeholders perceived NIMBY attitudes to be present in at least some communities – notably in the case studies further south:

> Sometimes it's a bunch of NIMBYs having control over people's lives like that, and I don't think that's right. As one parish councillor said to me, "they're not invited to the dinner party", well I'm sorry, but they bloody are! They have a right to eat at the same table, my friend (housing association representative, local authority C)

> The NIMBYs will object to anything, they will object to housing of any form, and if it's affordable housing that just gives them another thing to throw at them (planning officer, local authority A)

> There was quite a lot of opposition from people within the village, I'm afraid to say... and it was very much a case of Not In My Back Yard (parish council 1 representative, local authority F).

> In-comers have moved for life-style choices and tend to place higher value on
> environment in which they are coming so don't want change/damage (planning officer,
> local authority E).

Although most community representatives did not refer to NIMBYism, it is possible in several of the interviews to identify opposition to development that might be broadly described as 'in the public interest'.

The representative of parish council 1 in local authority D was opposed, perhaps understandably, to large scale social housing development in the village: 'They knocked all that lot down (gestures with hand) and rebuilt, but there is a problem later on if they sell them off that way, we could end up as a sink estate and that worries me. Because, you know – you're not supposed to – what is it they call it? Social engineering. You're not supposed to. But then, on the other hand, how do you watch your back?'

Similarly, the representative of parish council 1 in local authority E expressed the view that community feeling was against the idea of meeting the housing needs of neighbouring parishes. They confirmed that the parish council were supportive of the principle of providing for local parish needs where these could be clearly identified, but 'do not see [PC1] as responsible for providing for other parishes which might themselves be reluctant to see development happen'.

These views often reflected what appeared to be the opinion of many (if not most) local residents:

> But as far as housing is concerned, it was very interesting that a significant majority of
> villagers were only prepared to countenance affordable housing. I think that's probably
> a good thing for the sustainability of the community (parish council 2, local authority C)

> The housing thing was quite interesting – it's on the back of the parish plan. When we
> asked the question "do you want more housing in Lighthorne Heath", it was about 51%
> said yes, and 49% said no. I have to say, I was one of the ones that said no, initially. But
> actually, you have to go through the democratic process, and it was quite obvious that
> we had a housing problem. As chairman of the parish council, I felt we had a duty to
> make sure that people in our parish were properly housed and had a decent standard of
> accommodation. So even though it was against my better judgement, if you're elected
> to be on the parish council you have to put what you think to one side (parish council 3,
> local authority C).

> There was a general feeling of not wanting 'outsiders' in the village (parish council 2,
> local authority E).

At the same time, it seems that the issue of housing, whether affordable or otherwise, is one that can divide communities, and cause conflict between community members – who may be living in very close proximity to one another, as a housing association representative working in local authority C noted: 'I think we have to remember parish councils are volunteers, and they have to live there, often in quite small communities, and they're going to see these people all the time down the street, in the local pub – they're going to have to wear their lines on their skin, they can't just walk away from it. It's quite a big step for them, it's not a simple decision for a parish council to make'. This makes the attitude of some parish councils to press on regardless perhaps all the more impressive:

> But planning is one contentious thing in any area that has the ability to upset people, and get people standing up and asking "what are you going to do about this?" (parish council 2, local authority B)

> Interviewer: [According to your survey] Half the village wanted affordable housing, half did not want any more development?
> PC1 representative, local authority D: 'Yes. That's all very well if you're sitting in your own house'.

> We nearly had a mini-war on our hands, because the people who want them [affordable houses] are the people who've lived here for generations with their families, the people who were the main objectors were comers-in, and it got a little bit heated at one point... [the local authority] seem committed to trying to do something about it, which you've got to applaud them for. And in an affluent area, there isn't the push, is there, really, politically, for them to do it? Because a lot of people are being selfish, and asking "why should we do anything about it?" (parish council 3, local authority B).

Successful community planning/mechanisms for doing so

We have found evidence, particularly in Stratford-on-Avon, that local community planning can work, in the right circumstances. These quotes from the parish council representative from Long Compton demonstrate that where the community plan fits well with the strategic priorities of the local authority, success is possible:

> Interviewer: You've found the district council to be entirely cooperative with your desire for affordable housing?
> Parish council representative: Yes. We were given a strong pat on the back when we produced our parish plan, in that they saw it as a model of community involvement in deciding what they wanted. We had active encouragement to implement it, and when we said we wanted to focus on housing first, they said well done. We've certainly had no hurdles put in the way, and the target for getting the planning approval is end of next week, and I see no reason why we can't achieve that.

> The parish plan gives the Council some authority to move forwards, in that this is the parish wish, this is what they want. And that helps when you're going for funding, because the very first question people ask is "how do you know you need this?" And we can tell them the villagers said so!

A concluding quote, from parish council 3 representative in local authority B, demonstrates that community involvement must start early to be successful – a criterion a plan produced by, rather than on behalf of, the community, would achieve by default: 'I believe the parish council did everything possible to include community although it was only after the final decision on the site was made that this went public. So perhaps involving them more in the process leading up to making the decision on the site might be useful'.

Analysis of interviews

The data presented from the interviews with local community representatives, and with other stakeholders, provides some valuable evidence to help consider the questions set out in the introduction.

The interviews suggest that there is in many communities considerable resistance to the process of top-down planning. Some communities express outright unhappiness that they are not fully responsible for their own affairs, others are concerned that existing mechanisms for reflecting their views are not fully effective. This implies some appetite for a greater degree of community-led planning.

There is also evidence that where community planning has been implemented, it has proven successful, if the local community has sufficient capacity. However, there are some legitimate questions about how widespread that capacity is, with some community representatives already feeling overwhelmed by what they are expected to do, and challenged by dealing with local opposition. It seems to be the case that for communities or neighbourhoods to embrace the additional powers they are being offered by the Government, they will need both an unusual level of community capacity, and the courage to press on through what may be difficult and contentious discussions. Perhaps they need more support to do so?

There is also evidence that some opposition arises from local communities either not understanding, or refusing to engage with, strategic issues – in some cases this is expressed via straightforward NIMBYism, in others there are perhaps legitimate concerns that communities cannot be expected to accommodate need arising elsewhere. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that despite the Government's keenness for decentralisation, there remains a role for strategic planning – a view shared by others: 'planning will always play the role of the mediator, irrespective of which tier of government or democracy has the greatest voice' (Tewdwr-Jones, 2011).

Expectations, engagement and landscape management

Much has been written on the role resistance to development plays in rural politics. LPA officers are consistently faced with a range of problems arising from local campaign groups opposed to development. Various studies explore reasons for opposition (for a powerful categorisation which seeks to move away from simplistic notions of NIMBYism see Bell et al., 2005). However, as the centre-right coalition develops the inclusive notion of the Big Society it aims to place greater powers in the hands of local people, thereby removing a level of bureaucracy deemed excessive and counter the right to develop appropriately. Potentially this process could facilitate self-interested and parochial opposition with a policy agenda attached to it. Some have commented that this shift in focus from a top-down to a solely bottom up approach to decision-making will only support those who already have a voice. Those communities or people who currently find it difficult to engage with the decision-making process of planning may be able to engage with the process, but this may be in name only. The degree to which Parish Councils are representative of the local community has been questioned (Tewdwr-Jones, 1998), but the Localism Bill proposes devolving far more power to those structures in rural areas.

The dilemma for Local Authorities concerning localism is how to manage the level of input and raising of expectations that the Big Society agenda promotes. Whilst the public will have a greater level of influence in local decision-making the extent to which they can guide policy or implementation is somewhat untested. What is apparent though is that a greater level of consultation will need to be undertaken to actively engage local communities. Whether a representative cross section of a given population actually engage with this process is still to be seen. Consequently, LPAs may still receive the same level of input from people, however, they would have higher expectations of how their views are used. Successfully translating these expectations in action is one challenge that the Coalition Government has not yet fully set out in their proposals.

Exploring the value of the localism agenda in practice

Localism and the move towards a micro-level process of governance has a number of benefits; a greater level of engagement from local people; the ability to address the problems and needs of a local community directly; and the ability of local communities to control the financial impacts and implications of development. However, as the analysis of the opposition to rural house building and the Wicken Fen Vision highlights, a careful balance between local influence and meeting the requirements of planning legislation is needed if appropriate development is to occur.

The existing system of democracy in place whereby LPAs make decision through a cabinet or committee structure is supposed to ensure an open and transparent process of decision-making. Unfortunately this is not always the situation as personal perception or minority opinions are sometimes placed before the needs of a given community. Adopting the basic principles of the Localism Bill may help to alleviate this issue by placing the rights to make decisions in the hands of local people. Previous experiences however would suggest that a similar system of campaigning and patronage to those that exist with District, Town and Parish Councils are likely to develop that mirror the current system. A better understanding how and why people engage in local politics though is still required if a high percentage of people are to be actively involved in local governance (Healey, 2006).

The central change though will be that an elected committee will no longer be accountable in the same manner that LPAs are to central government or the planning inspectorate. How this will affect the robustness or viability of planning applications is yet to be seen but we would suggest that a greater number of challenges or appeals would be seen in the coming years. Although, the Decentralisation Bill states that decisions taken by local communities will be binding, developers and planners will no doubt appeal against approvals or rejections they feel are not in the best interest of a given location, or to some extent their business. It is also suspected that the planning inspectorate will be needed to moderate a larger number of applications because the level of debate we currently have in England will not be used to determine applications.

The Coalition Government's move to make local people the key decision makers masks the difficulty in approving planning applications. A high level of knowledge and expertise is needed to understand and apply planning legislation appropriately, knowledge which will not necessarily be held by local communities. Unfortunately due to the move away from a thorough LPA assessment of planning applications a scenario exists whereby local communities may support applications that would be otherwise rejected or vice versa. By providing communities with a right decide the future of their landscapes the Coalition may in fact be opening a Pandora's Box of problems.

The long-term management of community expectations will thus be one of the main issues arising from the implementation of localism. LPAs and central government will need to work closely with local communities if they are to realise the potential of localism to improve the process and transparency of governance. If this transition can be achieved then the move towards mirco-scale discussions that effectively influence practice may prove a once in a lifetime success. However, maintaining a longer-term attachment to the process of planning will be one area where local communities will need to be made aware of their duties as decision-makers. Some have found that only a specific stratum of society actively engages with local decision-making and once the novelty value of 'power' has worn off communities may fall back to a position of historical patronage, rather than community dialogue.

In respect to the case studies discussed within this paper the National Trust will need to monitor how ECDC manage this process if the Wicken Fen Vision is to be met. Mediating between local opposition and

wider support will be difficult within a localist approach to planning as it may give a disproportional voice to a minority opinion. Therefore in order to meet the strategic goals of the Wicken project the National Trust must actively engage with opposition members in order to reach an acceptable implementation plan. ECDC also needs to assess its position carefully if the environmental objectives outlined in its Core Strategy are to be met. Despite withholding its support for the Wicken Fen Vision ECDC has outlined its green credentials by working closely to develop the Cambridgeshire Green Infrastructure Strategy and deliver landscape enhancement across the district.

Conclusions

As discussed, and as shown by the evidence in previous sections, there is the potential for localism to have negative environmental, social and economic implications. It is essential that the way localism is implemented does not ignore these potential risks, and a system is devised that minimises them whilst maximising the strengths afforded by real and comprehensive local engagement with the planning and development process. There are however still issues that need to be resolved for this process to be successful, these issues include:

1. What could be perceived as a technical/regulatory issue – the process of community planning must be both sufficiently resourced and appropriately inclusive, to ensure that institutional capacity can be built up within communities, and to avoid the domination of the process by narrow interests.
2. More broadly, and drawing on the powerful literature on collaborative/communicative planning (for example Healey, 2006), there is a need to consider how localism is/can be part of a broader shift to a new way of planning for/by communities. Specifically:
    a. There seems to be a gap between the power to be offered to communities under the new system, and the responsibility taken on by them – i.e. communities must, as well as having the power to say no, have the responsibility to meet their needs, whether for affordable housing, infrastructure or whatever.
    b. Many planners are embedded in the ideas of top-down planning – can they be persuaded to change to a more conciliatory approach?
    c. f they do, will/can communities embrace this and who will manage this process? How will local people approach development – will they be entrenched in the negative views of development that support NIMBYism or will they moved towards a more progressive view new homes and or projects?
    d. Tied to this is the relationship between the money offered by the Government to incentivise development, including the New Homes Bonus and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). These operate at the local authority level, and are not ring-fenced. This provides little direct incentive for communities to say yes to development.
    e. The application of county level funding streams, such as CIL, at a local level will however need to carefully implemented to ensure that accountability and transparency in the allocation of public funds are managed in the best interest of a community.

The case studies discussed above highlight that over the last decade a pseudo-localist approach to planning has been in place in England. Using the language, and in some cases the methods of NIMBYism within the context of social protest and opposition local campaign groups could be described as foreseeing the rise of the Big Society and localism in order to meet their own agendas. It could also be argued that the localist agenda replicates the ideas developed within the Thatcher years of government by allowing local people or individuals to take ownerships over *'their'* environments. Moreover, where the Conservative government of the 1980's promoted the individual standing against a failing society, the

current centre-right coalition government could be described as promoting the individual as a lone voice against the top-down process of centralist planning.

Questions though still need to be raised regarding the development of strategic planning goals at a district, county and regional level. It could be argued that it would be foolish to expect non-planning experts to develop strategic level thinking, and this appears to be a part of the coalition's play to decentralise all aspects of the planning process. Whether local communities will be held accountable for short-termist decision-making is also unclear, what, however, is clear is that the coalition's Decentralisation Bill is clearly attempting to remove in the long-term the existing structures of planning to the point where it may be almost impossible to reinstate them should localism prove unsuccessful. It will also be an interesting time for the Planning Inspectorate as it is envisaged that a greater number of challenges will be made against locally led decisions. Where policy is in place, especially in respect of affordable rural housing and biodiversity, we envisage the HCA and Natural England having to challenge a far greater number of applications because of the failure of local communities to apply appropriate planning legislation. However, the proposed cuts to funding identified in the Comprehensive Spending Review (2010-11) may have a very real impact on their effectiveness. As a consequence there is the potential, however slight, that should the process of local decision-making prove fraught, there may be a reversal of thinking and a return to the pre-coalition system or a hybrid of both.

Although we propose that elements of the Decentralisation and Localism Bill would appear to present a positive future for local communities and decision-making at a mirco-scale, issues over the implementation of the Bill still remove. Answers are therefore needed if questions raised in this paper are to be actioned. For example:

- How will longer-term planning be approached? With the revocation of RSSs the regional tier of strategic planning who will be responsible for setting the agenda and how will it be implemented?
- Will LPAs still be made accountable for decisions taken at a community level if they fail to adhere to current planning legislation?
- What level of involvement will the LPA have in this process – will they be bypassed with local people and developers making decisions that are outside planning legislation?
- There is a need to understand the role LPAs will play in this process and how they will adapt to a different way of controlling/planning for development
- Further guidance on the consultation, management and approval of large-scale projects is needed to ensure that strategic and local agendas are met.

The provision of decision-making powers to civil society/local communities may seem like the most appropriate way to balance top-down political agendas with bottom-up local engagement. However care needs to be taken to ensure that decision-making is proportionally representative of all community members and not just of those who seek to engage with local politics. As a result the composition of local decision-making groups could become further skewed towards the views of educated, middle-class groups or individuals and be unrepresentative of wider community views. There are also unanswered questions relating to how larger scale county or regional projects are assessed. Will local communities be given the right to judge strategic projects or will their power be focussed on local projects? The application of such issues has not yet been fully outlined but is an area of the localism agenda that could, in the long-term lead to conflicts between local communities and developers. LPAs may therefore have an arbitration role to play in delivering localism effectively and maintaining a strategic and long-term component to housing and environmental planning.

It should be accepted that the move towards a localist approach to planning seems highly likely to happen. As a consequence the onus is on planning professionals and local authorities to prepare for these changes. LPAs need to, in one sense, relearn the process of providing guidance through a greater level of dialogue and engagement with local communities. If they can successfully achieve this they may go some way to removing the labels of bureaucracy and excessive red tape currently associated with planning in England. Town and Parish Councils, local communities and local opposition or pressure groups will, however, also need to learn that with the authority to make decisions comes a greater level of responsibility to assess the short-term and long-term needs of a location. Thus, although the removal of the strategic tier of planning may lower the long-term projections outlined in each RSS, the responsibility to plan for all will fall, potentially, on local community decision-makers. Guidance from the LPA may however be needed to ensure that some semblance of strategic thinking is developed within parish plans and local development strategies. Therefore, whilst we are not recommending that LPAs embrace localism without a level of trepidation they need to acknowledge and show a commitment to working within the policy agenda for the betterment of planning at a community level.

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