



Ipsos MORI  
Social Research Institute

# **Civic societies and localism**

**Report of a civic volunteer's workshop and presentation to  
Decentralisation Minister Greg Clark MP**

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# About this research

On 10<sup>th</sup> February 2011, ten members of civic societies across Kent met for a day-long workshop in Tunbridge Wells. The workshop, commissioned by Civic Voice, was facilitated by Ipsos MORI. After hours of deliberation, discussing a range of aspects of localism and the provisions of the Localism Bill, the participants presented their conclusions to the Minister of State for Decentralisation (and Tunbridge Wells MP): Greg Clark MP. This note summarises the key issues raised throughout the day, as well as highlighting the points made in the final presentation.

## Context

Before discussing responses to localism in detail, it is first worth considering views on the current opportunities available, and how the participants came to volunteer originally. Many of the participants are experienced volunteers; giving significant amounts of their time to local clubs and societies, and holding multiple positions of responsibility. As such, they are more involved and better informed than the general public, and are an interesting group to learn from.

## Journeys into volunteering

As you might expect, civic society members had followed a range of paths into volunteering. The main drivers include:

- ☛ **“Selfish Altruism”**: wanting to influence and improve their local area both for themselves and for others
- ☛ **Building local connections**: wanting to feel more involved in the local area (and wanting to know what is ‘going on’)
- ☛ **Doing something worthwhile**: life changes including retirement meant people had more time and wanted to use it constructively
- ☛ **Social reasons**: wanting to meet and get to know other people living locally, and maintaining participation to keep in touch
- ☛ **Single Issues**: many started by getting involved in relation to a single issue/ personal passion which then broadens into wider involvement
- ☛ **“Couldn’t say no”**: being personally asked to volunteer by a friend, neighbour or business contact.

Whatever the original driver to volunteer, all felt they could give at least one example of a time they had been persuaded to take on a new, additional role as a result of being asked. This snowball effect means that the same people appear across a number of organisations. Where they had made efforts themselves to ‘recruit’ successors or additional volunteers it was felt easier to engage people who are already involved than to find new people and get them interested.

## Shaping the local area

Civic society members were able to list a wide range of mechanisms for influencing their local area. Experiences were variable, with some feeling that their local council forums provided an excellent opportunity to influence decisions; whereas for others these constituted a ‘talking shop’ where very little would change as a result. Some had been involved in founding new associations, formed of local people with a shared interest, which had achieved a significant impact in some instances.

Concerns included whether or not people were aware of these mechanisms, and how accessible they were. Many felt that there is potential for schools to do more to teach young people about the opportunities available; not just for influencing local government, but also for taking ownership of problems and developing solutions. Examples including awards schemes to celebrate good practice were mentioned as a way to indirectly influence the local area, and to encourage individuals and businesses to take more individual responsibility.

## Response to the Localism Bill

### Summary

Overall, participants are broadly positive about the opportunities presented by the Bill. All of the participants are currently active in their communities and as such can see the potential for utilising the proposed rights in the Bill to shape their local area. However, they also have a number of underlying concerns, including whether or not the resources will be available to support volunteers, and how to ensure the measures are accessible to all communities and not just those best placed to act.

Some feel that the Bill represents a 'step change', moving from representative to collaborative democracy; a move which is generally, but not universally welcomed, particularly as some feel it could be less democratic and potentially open to hijack. Others feel that the changes will not be significant, for example because any neighbourhood plan must align with the Local Development Framework (LDF), national and international laws it could potentially be interpreted as "do what you like as long as we approve".

The implications of the Bill are likely to vary significantly depending on whether or not an area has a parish/town council or is 'un-parished'. Parish Councils are seen to be variable in their attitude towards discussion and consultation with local residents. While some are seen to do this very well, others are seen to be more closed in their approach which could have implications for how far power is devolved. However, while un-parished may have more flexibility because they can directly develop a Neighbourhood Plan, these areas do not have a local precept, so there are questions about how money to develop and action a plan could be raised.

### Strengths of the Bill

Civic society members welcome the **increased opportunity to shape their local area** into a place that they want to live and work. In particular, the idea of **harnessing local knowledge** and **stimulating proactive discussion** of local priorities is enthusiastically received. Participants feel the spirit of the bill could **lead to greater local transparency** and will empower local communities. The use of local referenda to agree Neighbourhood Plans in itself was seen to be a positive move, encouraging those drafting the plan to take a **collaborative approach** and reach out to all residents at an early stage.

This ability to take more control of the destiny of their local area, and have more influence over what happens there, is of interest. Participants could see a potential role for their civic society and its members in supporting local communities to take advantage of the new opportunities available. Some are hopeful that the opportunities will help to develop civic pride locally which in turn will have a positive impact on communities.

### Potential weaknesses

Immediate concerns are about '**unintended consequences**', and in particular the advantage that communities with greater skills and resources available to them could have.

Some feel that civic societies themselves could have a role here in mitigating the problem, by offering support to areas which might otherwise struggle.

Another consequence, particularly pertinent given the amount of time participants are already giving to a range of voluntary activities, is the **impact on volunteers**. Some query whether volunteers have the time or the expertise to develop a plan, and express concern that those who do have time may not be representative of the interests of the local area as a whole. They are particularly worried about finance and other support, feeling that the £3 million fund available will not be adequate to support every Neighbourhood Plan.

A further potential issue was that of **conflict resolution**, both within a local neighbourhood but also between neighbourhoods. In particular, whether the situation could arise where two Neighbourhood Plans were both in line with the LDF but nonetheless conflicted with each other, and what would happen in that instance. Linked to this are concerns about the loss of County Structure Plans and the implications this could have on strategic development, in particular transport infrastructure.

## Developing a successful neighbourhood plan

Drawing on the experience and expertise of civic society members, the following are seen to be essential for the successful development of a Neighbourhood Plan. Some of these skills and resources exist within civic societies and other local groups, while others will need to be brought in from outside; in such cases funding is a particular concern. The exact needs of a neighbourhood will, naturally, depend on who already lives there and whether they are willing and able to contribute to the development of the plan.

- ☛ **Leadership:** while the plan should incorporate the views of all local residents, strong leadership is seen as vital in ensuring everyone is encouraged to contribute. Leadership could come from a ward member if they have the appropriate skills. It is important that they can communicate the ambitions of the plan and allay any fears.
- ☛ **Communication:** in order to engage a wide number of people they will have to be aware of the opportunities to get involved. Communications advice would be required to do this effectively, as would funding for leaflets, letters and advertising.
- ☛ **Meetings:** developing the plan will require community meetings in which to agree the content. Depending on local issues civic society members feel this could potentially require professional facilitation in order to reach consensus. Additional resources required will be a venue and refreshments – both of which will have to be paid for.
- ☛ **Guidance:** some areas will have greater levels of planning expertise than others. Participants feel that most would benefit from examples and guidance about how a plan might look. Additionally, some will require more specialist planning and/or legal advice to ensure that their plan captures the essence of what they want to achieve.
- ☛ **Reality check:** because this is seen to be an extension of the power (and therefore responsibility) held by volunteers, the idea of having the reassurance of a final ‘reality check’ of plans to ensure they are not unintentionally biased or open to abuse would be well received.
- ☛ **Confidence:** although some may have many of the skills necessary, overall the task of preparing a plan is potentially daunting. While some welcome the opportunity to shape the plan to local interests, others are concerned that there is so much that *could* be included it is difficult to know where to start and how to prioritise. Building community confidence in their ability to develop a plan will therefore be very important.

Throughout there is a consistent need for resources, both human and financial, to support the process.

# Mitigating potential risks & challenges

## Overview

The main focus of participant's presentation to the Minister was the risks and challenges created by the Bill and how they can potentially be mitigated. A number of risks were identified and then participants focussed on what they perceive to be the three most significant risks to develop mitigation strategies and what role the Government and civic societies might play.

Risks/Challenges stemming from the Localism Bill	
Risk	Description
Understanding the opportunities	Communicating in plain English the implications of the Bill for local communities
Risk of inequality	Different communities having different skills, some of whom may therefore be at a disadvantage
Recruiting volunteers	Already people who volunteer are under pressure and have difficulty encouraging others to engage
Having time to participate	Perception that those who work full time do not have as much time to volunteer but could bring important skills – potential role for employers in facilitating their involvement
Risk of being daunted	Task is so great that it needs to be simplified so that people know 'where to begin'
People not thinking creatively	Ideally people need to think creatively to find cost effective solutions to local issues, particularly in the light of cuts, but not clear how this will be encouraged
Resources e.g. accessing expert advice	Concern that local areas will not have the money to access the support they need to develop a plan
Divergent views in community / NIMBY-ism	Potential for different people in the community wanting different things and difficulty of mediating this
Explaining / communicating the changes	Once the centre has defined the changes local groups will need assistance explaining them to their communities
Un-parished areas at disadvantage	Without a precept, there is a concern un-parished areas will have limited resources available

## Building understanding of the Bill

Ultimately, community participation will depend on understanding the opportunities available. If people do not realise they have new rights and responsibilities, they will not utilise them effectively. Participants considered the role of Government in ensuring that people do understand the Bill, and also what civic societies can do to help.

### Role of Government

Participants felt that Government should be seeking to answer three key questions:

1. What already exists in current systems?
2. What is good and how can this be built on?
3. How does the proposed legislation remove constraints?

Together it was felt that the answers to these questions would increase buy-in by explaining how the new system relates to the existing one – an important issue for those who are already involved. Answers would also serve to highlight the opportunities to encourage people to take them up.

### Role of civic societies

In turn, it was felt that civic societies are well placed to take these messages into communities. In particular, they can explain the implications in the local context and use the information to encourage more people to participate. Participants feel that these new powers have the potential to inspire more people to be involved, and civic societies can be one conduit through which this message is spread. Additionally, some members will have the skills to enable areas to develop their own Neighbourhood Plans, as well as targeting new people to get involved who might have specific skills needed by the area.

## Recruiting and retaining volunteers

A second key concern was the recruitment and retention of volunteers. In particular, worries that the production of a plan would place unreasonable demands on a small number of people unless new people can be engaged in the process.

### Role of Government

Government's role is seen to be encouraging people to volunteer in a number of ways. In particular, participants saw three segments (roughly mapped onto generations) which will need to be engaged in different ways.

For those who are already engaged (the older generations) participants think government should provide a positive narrative for the civic movement – encouraging and supporting those who are already involved.

For those of working age incentives to do voluntary work are seen to be important. These could be financial (tax breaks) or softer (such as offering training). In particular, the idea of employers being incentivised to encourage employees to volunteer, for example by giving them time off, was appealing.

For younger generations, participants felt that it is vital to be teaching civics in schools, to encourage young people to take greater pride and responsibility for their local area.

## **Role of civic societies**

Civic societies are always looking to build and refresh their membership. They have existing structures and experience in recruitment which can potentially be utilised to bring more people into volunteering. By identifying an in-house champion for recruitment and identifying appropriate projects through which people can be engaged, participants feel that their organisations could help to mobilise more people to get involved. In addition to a large existing membership, there is the potential to turn recruits into advocates and as such to expand the movement further and encourage more people to take part.

## **Increasing inequality between areas with skills and those without**

The third issue is that of potentially increasing inequality through differential use of powers conferred by the Bill. Even in Kent (where all the participants are from), there are deprived areas with high unemployment, people on low wages and with little disposable income and potentially low motivation to get involved for a wide range of reasons. 'Middle class capture' is perceived to be a risk and one that Civic Society members are keen to see mitigated.

## **Role of Government**

The role of Government is broadly perceived to be identifying areas without neighbourhood plans which might want them and then providing targeted advice and support free of charge to community. This should ensure that areas are not left behind due to lack of resources. In addition, members felt that Government could help by sharing examples from other areas to make the task more straightforward.

There is some concern that in some areas local authorities might potentially be obstructive. In these circumstances, participants are looking for reassurance that central Government will intervene to ensure that the spirit of the Bill is followed and that local residents really do get what they want.

## **Role of civic societies**

Civic societies cover a significant proportion of the country. Where they exist they are well placed to facilitate partnership working both within and between areas to ensure that learning is shared between different neighbourhoods, rather than remaining in silos. Developing community projects (e.g. using schools to promote ideas) was seen to be an important part of this.

Where there is not currently a civic society presence, members felt options included working with existing organisations (e.g. Tenant Associations / SureStart / Transition Towns) to build capacity or potentially setting up civic societies, forums or special purpose vehicles where they don't exist.

# Views of the Minister

At the end of the workshop, participants presented their views directly to the Minister of State for Decentralisation: Greg Clark MP. Below we summarise the key points he made in response.

- ☛ **Background:** the Government is really excited about the potential for the Localism Bill. It has already received considerable interest across the House of Commons with an unusually high proportion of MPs applying to speak in the debate and/or to sit on the bill committee. The ambition is to see change on the ground as a response to the Bill in early 2012.
- ☛ **Accessibility of the Bill:** the Minister recognised that, necessarily, the Bill itself is not particularly accessible to the lay reader. He highlighted the existence of the Essential Guide and also a forthcoming publication designed to make key aspects of the Bill more accessible.
- ☛ **Transfer of power:** the Minister recognised the difficulty to ensure power is exercised at the appropriate level and confirmed it is his responsibility and that of his department to ensure that “people are prised away from the levers of power”. Government is not under the illusion that these changes will be easy. In particular, they anticipate more ‘fractious’ local debates which will have to be resolved locally, and recognise that the transfer of power will not necessarily be smooth.
- ☛ **Recruitment challenges:** as identified by the civic societies earlier in the day, recruitment is not seen to be an easy hurdle to overcome. The Minister was hopeful that the changes brought about by the Bill could in themselves act as an agent for change, as people see that their contribution will potentially have a greater impact than before. He recognises that in many cases single issues will remain the main motivation to participate, but is hopeful this can be developed into a productive, ongoing relationship. Perhaps one single-issue could be development of the neighbourhood plan itself.
- ☛ **Rights open to be shaped:** it is important to note that many of the ideas set out in the Bill are rights, and as such are not designed to be prescriptive. The hope is that communities will avail themselves of these rights but that they can choose how best to apply them locally: for example, deciding whether a short note outlining an ambition to “preserve green space” or a much longer document outlining a detailed neighbourhood plan are appropriate.
- ☛ **Financial support for volunteers unlikely:** the Minister is unable to promise tax relief on volunteering but is hopeful that if people can see the purpose of volunteering they will be more likely to do so (e.g. parent involvement in schools is high when children are young).
- ☛ **Sharing ideas:** the ambition is for good and/or valuable neighbourhood plans to be shared between areas so that there is collective learning. DCLG has been inundated with requests to trial producing a plan before the Bill becomes law so are hopeful take-up will be high. The hope is that once one local area has a plan, neighbouring areas will become more aware of the right and will want one too.
- ☛ **Overcoming cynicism:** The Minister recognised the concern that there is a degree of fatigue or cynicism about government initiatives to help disadvantaged communities. This government is keen to give power to people actually within the communities, rather than bringing in external solutions. An example is the work of Mohammed Yunus who won a Nobel Prize for his work on community micro-credit which has been replicated. Housing Associations are seen as a good example of being based in deprived areas but have been less paternalistic than government: as such they provide a good model for involvement and capacity building and funds will be targeted in these areas.

The Minister also agreed to answer any other questions which civic society members wished to raise. These are summarised below:

- ☛ **What funds will be available for neighbourhood plans and how will they be targeted?** £3million will initially be available to national organisations to work with neighbourhoods to develop their plans. Also need to make the most of local residents who have professional skills (e.g. architects etc) who might give them to the community for free if asked. Additionally, parish councils can use the precept to raise additional funds and people can also make a personal contribution if they choose to.
- ☛ **As the Bill abolished regional strategies, local authorities will now choose how many houses to build. Will it be possible to persuade them to have more homes than their previous 'imposed' targets?** Under the old system the number of houses in the plan was inversely proportional to the number of new houses actually built, because where a higher number were planned, more barriers were put up locally to block the development. Imposing targets didn't work: if you tell British people what do to they dig their heels in, but if you ask them what they want then they will discuss the issue. The new policy is about asking not telling where new homes will be positioned.
- ☛ **Please outline your thoughts on how the community right to appeal will work in practice?** Civic societies are right to be worried about this. The old system has conditioned people to expect to relate to the planning system in a certain way: Government would argue this is dysfunctional and not a good way to develop a thriving town. The new system is designed to ask what you want the town to look like and give that vision legal force. Then any permission will be granted or denied depending on whether or not it sits within the outline of the plan: what the plan sets out will be sovereign. Therefore, the community is unlikely to have much need to appeal as anything given permission will be by definition be in line with the plan.
- ☛ **In our experience, the people who are best at filling in forms are the ones who get the best community halls (etc). We've found one solution is to provide 'funding buddies' who can handhold a community through the process and ensure those less used to filling in forms get support from those who have experience.** The Minister thought this sounded like a very interesting idea and committed to talking about it with his colleagues.
- ☛ **Could you talk more about the proposed changes to the community infrastructure levy?** The idea of the CIL (started by the previous government) is to set up a transparent tariff for community impact. Whereas the old system was opaque and limited, decided behind closed doors, this new approach should be more straightforward. It will require that a significant proportion of the levy goes to the neighbourhood affected. The tariff could be between £5k and £20k per home although this is not yet agreed. The money would go to the parish council where one exists, or the local authority to spend in consultation with the locality where a parish council does not exist.
- ☛ **Are town/parish councils required to consult on CIL?** Yes: it is envisaged that they will provide a list of options for how to spend the levy which will be put to the local community.
- ☛ **What about the wider impact of new building (e.g. migration to new build leaving empty homes elsewhere)?** This is not answered within the Bill and is an issue that had not been fully considered. It will be considered in development of the guidance which accompanies the Bill.
- ☛ **Without regional plans, how will areas be co-ordinated?** There will be opportunities to develop regional ideas into local plans. There is also a duty to co-operate between local areas, which county councils and local areas should benefit from.

## Conclusions

The workshop and discussion with Minister Greg Clark MP confirmed the significant additional contribution local civic societies and other community groups have to offer to the future of their areas. It revealed widespread support for the opportunities of localism alongside some clear challenges to its success.

The key issues identified include:

- the need to communicate and appeal to the social and emotional reasons why people get involved in their community
- the importance of communities having the expert support and resources which will enable them to make full use of the provisions of the Localism Bill
- communication of the opportunities provided by the Localism Bill needs to be done in a way that will appeal to potential volunteers and community groups by emphasising how it can help address the issues that matter to them and using language and techniques which work for lay audiences
- the risk of unreasonable demands being placed on a small number of community volunteers, with a need for new incentives and enablers to encourage volunteering by those of working age
- ensuring the benefits of localism should be accessible to all and not just those who are well placed to take advantage
- the value of practical examples of what other communities are doing to inspire and inform local action, including “buddies” who can help with fundraising or sharing their own experience of getting involved
- avoiding localism being hijacked by vested interests by ensuring it reaches out to all parts of the community
- the importance of strengthening parish and town councils which vary considerably in their capability from one place to another
- the vital role to be played by ward councillors in supporting and leading their communities, and how their skills and capabilities are highly variable
- the role of civic societies in supporting the development of different communities to take advantage of localism and in sharing experience from different areas

# Workshop participants

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John Forster  
Tunbridge Wells Civic Society

Peter Tann  
Faversham Society

Professor Jan Pahl  
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The Dover Society

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The workshop was facilitated by Anna Pierce (Ipsos MORI) and Tony Burton (Civic Voice)

Greg Clark MP, Minister of State for Decentralisation, responded to the workshop conclusions