![Locality — the power of community]

People Power

Findings from the Commission on the Future of Localism

Contents

East Cleveland Big Local April 2016 Klondike bike race

About the Commission

Locality established the Commission on the Future of Localism in 2017, in partnership with Power to Change, to consider how to reinvigorate localism and unlock the power of community. The ambition behind the Localism Act is in danger of waning, and the fundamental shift in power from Westminster to communities has not yet been achieved.

We find that we need radical action to strengthen our local institutions; devolve tangible power resources and control to communities; ensure equality in community participation; and deliver change in local government behaviour and practice to enable local initiatives to thrive.

Our Commissioners:

- **Lord Kerslake (Chair)** President of the Local Government Association (LGA) and former Head of the Home Civil Service

- **Alison Haskins,** CEO of Halifax Opportunities Trust

- **Joanna Holmes,** CEO of Barton Hill Settlement

- **Neil Johnson,** CEO of Paddington Development Trust

- **Lisa Nandy,** Member of Parliament for Wigan

- **Laura Sandys,** former Member of Parliament for South Thanet, and Vice President of Civic Voice

- **Councillor Sharon Taylor,** Leader of Stevenage Borough Council

- **Professor Jane Wills,** University of Exeter, and author of 'Locating Localism: Statecraft, citizenship and democracy'

What we did – our research methods

Over the past nine months, we have gathered evidence and ideas from policy-makers, local leaders, organisations and communities across the country through evidence events, focus groups, calls for written evidence and survey responses.

Our Commission held three evidence events in London, Bristol and Manchester. As well as presentations from invited witnesses, these events also included focus groups with participants. The three evidence events were structured around three themes: reviewing the impact of the Localism Act and Community Rights; building community capacity and participation; the devolution agenda and local governance structures.

A written call for evidence prompted responses from 22 organisations. An online survey on Community Rights was completed by 151 respondents. A full list of witnesses and our call for evidence as well as survey questions can be found in the full length report online.

About this report:

We present the findings from the Commission in two parts:

1. The summary of our findings and our recommendations.
2. The full body of evidence is available online at **www.locality.org.uk**

Foreword

Lord Bob Kerslake
Chair of the Commission on the Future of Localism

I'm delighted to be introducing this report as Chair of the Commission on the Future of Localism.

In recent years, we have seen successive initiatives to decentralise power, increase freedoms and responsibilities for local government, and enable greater community action. Indeed, when Eric Pickles first became Secretary of State of Communities and Local Government in 2010 he was clear that his three priorities were "localism, localism, localism". And when David Cameron came to visit, he made sure there was no ambiguity about the department's commitment. "What do we want?", the Secretary of State cried? "Localism", came the orchestrated response from the civil servants gathered in the lobby to welcome the new, slightly taken aback, Prime Minister. Having worked with him, I have no doubt about Eric Pickles' sincerity on this, albeit that it came with a gruelling austerity programme for local government.

Yet seven years on from the passage of the Localism Act, the fundamental shift in power away from Westminster promised by the legislation has not been achieved. The subsequent devolution deals of the Northern Powerhouse have similarly not altered the fact that we continue to live in one of the most centralised and geographically unbalanced countries in Europe. Our Commission set out to understand why and explore what is required to inject renewed motivation into the localism agenda, unlocking the power of community to ensure that all local areas can thrive.

Over the past nine months we have been gathering case studies, ideas, and recommendations from community groups, local leaders and policy experts, at evidence events across the country. We have heard about the enormous impact which can be achieved by people working together to change their neighbourhoods. However, we have also heard about the blockages and barriers to local action which constrain the power of community and restrict the potential of localism.

In order to fundamentally reset the power balance between the governing and the governed, we need an approach to localism which looks beyond devolved decision-making to local government. To this end, our report highlights the action that is required across four domains of localism: institutions; powers; relationships; and community capacity. National government must show leadership in setting the conditions for localism to flourish. But it is to local leadership that we look with the majority of our recommendations – to wield their power to convene local partnerships around place, strengthen community institutions, and create the environment where local initiatives can thrive.

Thanks are due to those that have given their time as witnesses to our Commission, participants in discussion groups, and contributors to our survey and written evidence: this has been a rich source from which to build our recommendations and approach. We have been very fortunate to have been steered by a panel of Commissioners who have used their expertise, experience and insight to guide the Commission to its recommendations. Our debates have been both stimulating and challenging, and I thank them all for their time throughout this process.

Tony Armstrong
Chief Executive of Locality

Locality believes in the power of communities, and we have been championing localism long before it became fashionable. We established the Commission on the Future of Localism because we were concerned that the welcome ambition and drive behind the Localism Act were in danger of waning. Having long lobbied government for greater powers for communities, we believe the Community Rights introduced through the Localism Act were a landmark moment. We have been providing the advice and support to communities to take up the opportunities of the Act – and have seen the many successes achieved.

The current devolution agenda, which has rather eclipsed the localism agenda, does not focus on neighbourhoods or communities and risks entrenching the disconnection and lack of accountability felt throughout the rest of the political system. Although we still hear the rhetoric of localism, the job is not yet done.

Throughout this Commission's work, we have heard from communities who are unable to affect the change they know their neighbourhood needs because 'real power resides elsewhere.' Too often those who advocate greater localism ask politicians to pass down the power they hold. But this is looking at things the wrong way round. Power doesn't belong to decision-makers to 'give away': we need a localism agenda which makes the case that power starts with people. It lies in our communities. The task of the political system and our local leaders is to harness this power through ongoing relationships, engagement and co-creation.

My thanks go to our Chair and Commissioners who have guided this work, sharing their knowledge and expertise, and providing challenge, insight and debate as we have reached our recommendations. We are also grateful to Power to Change in co-funding and working in partnership with us throughout this project. And particular thanks to our fantastic Locality policy lead, Ruth Breidenbach-Roe, for coordinating the entire process, drawing out the key themes and supporting the Commissioners to develop this excellent report.

Vidhya Alakeson
Chief Executive of Power to Change

Power to Change is delighted to support the Commission on the Future of Localism. We firmly believe that many of the most significant problems we face as a country from stark economic inequalities to the long term sustainability of public services cannot be exclusively addressed in Whitehall or in the city regions. They require power to be pushed down to the local level, unleashing the creativity and expertise of communities.

Every day through the community businesses we support, we see local people coming together to address local concerns, whether that is the loss of a local service, the need for more affordable homes or the isolation experienced by older people. What these examples demonstrate is that in many cases local people are best placed to know what will work to improve their neighbourhood and their lives and the role of government and funders such as ourselves is to enable them to realise their ambition and put their entrepreneurial spirit to work.

It is urgent that all levels of government, especially local authorities, embrace the need to put people in the driving seat and work with communities as genuine partners in making lasting local change. The report of the Commission is a great next step for this agenda and we look forward to championing those local authorities who choose to lead and come forward to implement the valuable recommendations of the report.

Executive summary

The Commission on the Future of Localism was established to consider how to reinvigorate the localism agenda. We find that the 'fundamental shift of power' promised by the Localism Act 2011 has not yet been achieved. To unlock the power of community, we need radical action that strengthens our local institutions; devolves tangible power, resources and control; ensures equality in community participation; and delivers the culture change required to enable local initiatives to thrive.

In the wake of the vote to leave the European Union, policy-makers and commentators now speak of our 'left-behind' communities. But these divides have been growing and widening for years. They are the product, in part, of political and economic centralisation and a long-term failure to address our profound democratic deficit. Entrenched geographical health inequalities, with a stark North South divide.[1] Educational opportunity tied to parental income, pushing up house prices in neighbourhoods with good schools.[2] Withdrawal of finance from disadvantaged communities, with our big banks secure in the City deemed 'too big to fail'.[3] An electoral system that only feels like it counts if you live in a marginal seat [4], with political alienation most prevalent among the young and the poor[5].

As Britain seeks to forge a new future after the EU referendum vote, our Commission believes that greater localism must be at the forefront of our national debate.

Strengthening localism offers the potential to tackle disadvantage, rebalance our economy, and revitalise democracy. Taking part in local action can strengthen feelings of community cohesion, generate a greater sense of pride and purpose, and improve wellbeing.[6] Localism in public service design and delivery can ensure that services are equipped to address local needs and harness local assets, and make sure public procurement spend is reinvested in the local community.[7] Giving places the means to strengthen their local economies and rebalance economic growth away from London and the South East is not only good for local areas but also supports productivity across the nation as a whole.[8]

There is growing political consensus on the need to decentralise. It is clear that the scale and complexity of our social challenges is so great, they are unlikely to be effectively addressed from Westminster. But while successive pieces of legislation and various programmes have sought to achieve this, our Commission finds that we have not yet secured a radical rebalancing of power to people.

Localism must be about giving voice, choice and control to communities who are seldom heard by our political and economic institutions. Localism should enable local solutions through partnership and collaboration around place, and provide the conditions for social action to thrive. Localism is about more than local governance structures or decentralising decision-making. It is about the connections and feelings of belonging that unite people within their communities. It is about how people perceive their own power and ability to make change in their local area alongside their neighbours.

[1] A baby boy born in London and the South East, on average, will live three years longer than his peer born in the North East.
Public Health England. (2017) 'Using local health data to address health inequalities.' PHE. Available at: https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2017/10/12/using-local-health-data-to-address-health-inequalities/
[2] Gibbons, S, Machin, S and Silva, O. (2012) 'Valuing school quality using boundary discontinuities.' Centre for the Economics of Education. Available at: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/45239/
[3] King, I. (2017) 'Some banks are still too big to fail, Bank of England Governor admits.' Sky News [online]. Available at: https://news.sky.com/story/bank-of-england-governor-ending-too-big-to-fail-not-complete-11059507
[4] Select Committee on Political and Constitutional Reform. (2012) 'Voter engagement in the UK – Political and Constitutional Reform.' House of Commons. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmpolcon/232/23205.htm
[5] Flinders, M. (2014) 'Low voter turnout is clearly a problem, but a much greater worry is the growing inequality of that turnout.' LSE British Politics and Policy [online]. Available at: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/look-beneath-the-vote/

[6] McKinnon, E and Green, K. (2015) 'Community Organisers – inspiring people to build a bigger, stronger society.' Cabinet Office [online]. Available at: https://coanalysis.blog.gov.uk/2015/08/11/community-organisers-inspiring-people-to-build-a-bigger-stronger-society/
[7] Locality. (2017). 'Powerful Communities, Strong Economies.' Locality. Available at: http://locality.org.uk/resources/powerful-communities-strong-economies-report/
[8] OECD. (2012). 'Promoting Growth in All Regions: Lessons from across the OECD.' OECD [online]. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/site/govrdpc/49995986.pdf

We need to completely reframe how we think about power.

When we think about power we tend to look upwards – towards Westminster-based institutions and elected politicians. Those who wish to see greater localism often ask politicians to give it away and push power downwards. But this is looking at things the wrong way round. Instead, we need to start with the power of community. The task of our political system should be to support this, harness it, and reflect it in our national debate.

Our Commission has heard evidence about what makes a powerful community. While different communities build and experience power in different ways, there are common sources. We heard how the power of any community lies with its people, their collective ideas, innovation, creativity and local knowledge, as well as their sense of belonging, connectedness and shared identity. We need to bring this into political life much more effectively via a renewed effort to foster localism in future.
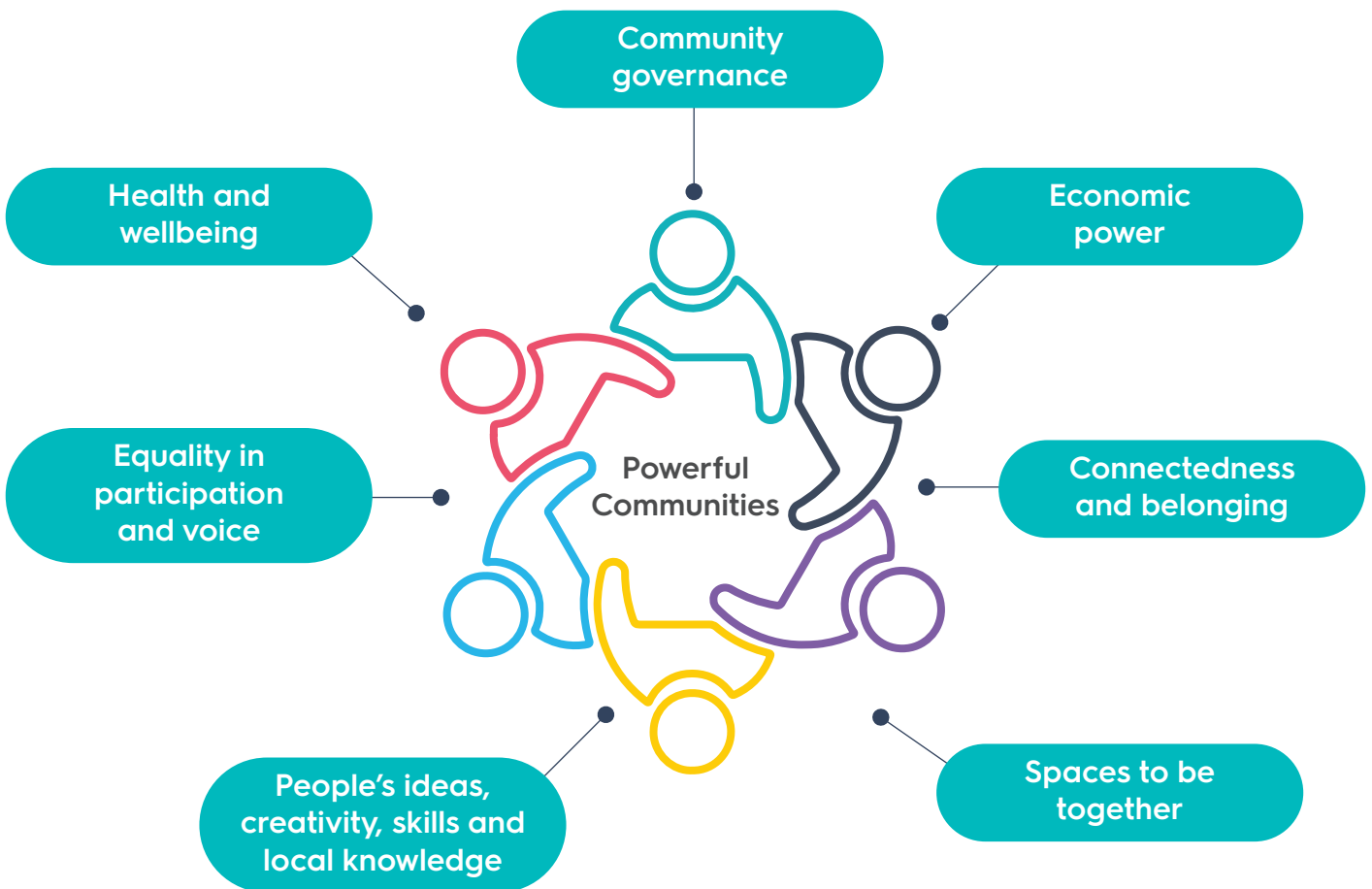

Fig 1. What are the sources of community power?

However, our Commission has also heard about a fundamental imbalance of power that is preventing this power of community from coming to life and restricting collective agency: top-down decisions leaving community groups and local councils unable to make the change they know their neighbourhood needs; a lack of trust and risk aversion from public bodies, dampening community energy; a lack of control and access to local resources, limiting the scope of local action.

The future of localism: our recommendations

Fostering localism is a marathon, not a sprint. The change that's required cannot be achieved through policy and legislative levers alone.

National government must set the conditions for localism to flourish, devolve power and resources to local areas and strengthen the capacity of our community institutions. But we must also change practices, culture and behaviour within local government. It is crucial that we focus on building strong relationships between local government, civil society, local businesses and people around a shared interest in place. Only then will we create the environment for local initiatives to thrive and unlock the power of community.

Strengthening community power requires action in four key domains of localism

01 Institutions for localism: healthy local governance structures across the country, integrated within wider governance.

02 Powers and mechanisms for localism: ensuring there are meaningful powers, levers and resources for communities to take action locally

03 Relational localism: changing culture and behaviours requires embracing risk and establishing trust in devolution to communities, local leaders acting as facilitators for community expertise, and disrupting hierarchies.
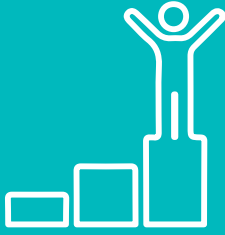
04 Capacity for localism: ensuring localism is not the preserve of wealthier communities, or those with the loudest voices requires building community capacity, supporting community organising, community development and sustainable spaces for participation.

Initiatives to strengthen localism should be subject to six key principles

01

People are the end goal of localism: interventions should be judged by the impact they have on people, rather than institutions alone.

02

Equality in local participation: not everybody wants to participate in the same way, but there needs to be equality of consideration and an equal opportunity to participate.

03

Dynamic local accountability: accountability must not be based on consultations and voting alone: it must value ongoing community participation, relationships and local action.

04

Local leadership is built around place: in whichever form, party politicians or community leaders, leadership should be built around place, convening community partnership around shared local concerns.

05

Localism requires meaningful powers and integrated structures: local powers should not be easily dismissed by 'higher' tiers of governance, without clear reasons and means of redress.

06

Economic power must support community responsibility: communities must have the means and resources to match powers and responsibilities, and to realise the potential of localism.

Introduction

For years now, politicians have been promising to give away power. There has been growing acceptance that the scale and complexity of our social challenges are so great that the centre cannot hope to address them on their own. Our Commission has gathered evidence on the outcomes and impact of recent initiatives to decentralise, with particular focus on the Localism Act 2011 and the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016. We find that these initiatives have stopped short of the radical reframing of power we require.

The Localism Act

The Localism Act 2011 was heralded by an ambition to "end the era of top-down government [through a] fundamental shift of power from Westminster to people."[9] This legislation built on an emergent political consensus for a stronger role for local government and to put greater powers in the hands of communities. The General Power of Competence was given to local government, seeking to unlock greater innovation and local self-determination. A set of Community Rights was established, giving communities a framework to protect and own valued local assets, influence local planning and development, and run local services.

This legislation was an important staging post on the road to localism. The Community Rights have enabled communities to make real change in their neighbourhoods. Neighbourhood planning has seen over 2,000 communities, representing approximately 12 million people, developing plans for new homes, shops and green spaces in their local area – and once passed through local referendum these plans are given statutory weighting and must be taken into account by decision makers. The Right to Bid has seen iconic local buildings put into community hands, and has given communities a route to mobilise against the sale of such assets, knowing there is a formal process to back them up.

But we have also heard how using the Community Rights remains too dependent on local capacity and resources. A longstanding concern with localism is that it can actually entrench inequalities, strengthening the position of those with the resources, time and networks, whilst excluding the most marginalised communities. The Ubele Initiative, for example, has questioned the ability of the Localism Act to strengthen Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) community ownership of assets, compounded by a lack of research on the equalities dimension in the localism agenda.[10]

The outcomes of the Localism Act also remain tied to the supportiveness and behaviours of the local authority. While some local authorities have embraced greater localism, and the innovation it can unlock, in too many areas public bodies remain top-down and risk adverse. Throughout our evidence, we have heard from community groups, parishes and town councils, about how community-led initiatives and local decisions can be trumped from above, because 'real power resides elsewhere'.

The devolution agenda

After the Localism Act, came the devolution agenda in England – which began with the signing of the Greater Manchester Devolution Deal in November 2014. Devolution represents a massive opportunity to reshape our economy and public services, and, in theory at least, provides greater impetus for localism.

But the assumption that devolution will somehow automatically trickle down to people and neighbourhoods through these new arrangements is misguided. Reducing the debate on localism to the question of "what powers are devolved?", while a key part, misses the fundamental point about localism: people are the end goal, not local government.

Devolution as it currently stands does not secure a fundamental shift in power to people. The representativeness of new City-Region mayors and combined authorities members also shows how devolution is replicating the gender, race and class imbalances that are so prevalent throughout the rest of the political system. All six of the metro mayors elected in May 2017 are men, and their cabinets are 94 per cent male.[11]

While Government is seeking to address the heavy bias in our economy towards London and the South East, creating regional industrial strategies through the Northern Powerhouse and the Midlands Engine is not enough. Indeed, growth driven by city region agglomeration risks exacerbating inequalities within places, even as some differences between regions are levelled out. We need to open up possibilities for our smaller cities, towns, suburbs and villages, to have power over their local economies[12], if we are truly to realise the Government's ambition to 'create an economy that works for everyone.'[13]

[9] Cameron, D and Clegg, N. (2010). 'The Coalition: Our programme for government.' HM Government. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/78977/coalition_programme_for_government.pdf
[10] Field, Y. Murray, K. and Chilangwa Farmer, D. (2015). 'A place to call home: Community asset ownership in the African Diaspora Community.' The Ubele Initiative and Locality. Available at: http://locality.org.uk/resources/place-call-home-community-asset-ownership-african/

[11] Lewis, H. (2017). 'Power to (half the) people: metro mayors and their teams are 94 per cent male.' New Statesman (online). Available at: https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/devolution/2017/05/new-liverpool-metro-mayor-steve-rotherams-top-team-seven-men-no-women
[12] Laurence, R. (2016). ' Growing the economy from the middle out.' In Berry C (ed) The Resurrected Right and the Disoriented Left. Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute. Available at: http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/SPERI-Paper-27-The-Resurrected-Right-and-Disoriented-Left.pdf
[13] May, T. (2016). 'Theresa May's conference speech: We can make Britain a country that works for everyone.' CCHQPress. Available at: http://press.conservatives.com/post/147947450370/we-can-make-britain-a-country-that-works-for

After the EU Referendum

Britain is now at a crossroads of major political and constitutional change. The outcome of the EU referendum provides a clear mandate for rethinking localism. The demand to 'take back control' made during the campaign, reflected a sense of powerlessness of people lacking a stake in their communities and futures. Whatever the outcome of Brexit negotiations, we urgently need to address the long-term under-investment in our civic and social infrastructure, to build institutions and spaces for participatory democracy, and to ensure that local organising has genuine routes to the resources required to make change. We need a new vision for localism which is based on principles of equality and diversity in participation and voice across the whole of our country.

We need to radically reframe power: in our political systems; in our public services; and in our communities.

Advocates for localism too often fall into a narrative trap of arguing for power to be 'handed' from the centre 'downwards' to communities, inevitably in ever diminishing packages. The consequence of a representative democracy is that expression of democratic participation can become largely transactional. Power is 'given' from the electorate to MPs and councillors at elections, and further political and policy engagement is too often limited to consultation, rather than collaboration and conversation.

We need to make the case that power starts with people: power doesn't belong to decision-makers to 'give away'. The task of the political system and our local leaders is to harness this power through ongoing relationship, engagement and co-creation.
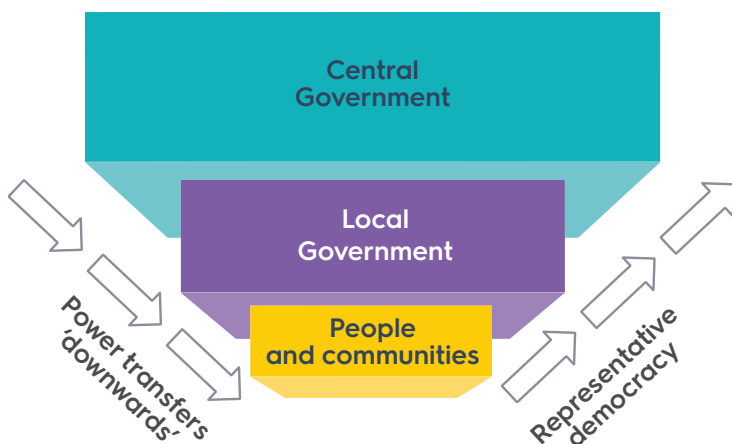

Fig.2. Current expectations of power and democracy

The way in which our public service and welfare systems work can reinforce a sense of powerlessness. Accessing public services is a key interaction of everyday life for many; when the behaviours of public bodies is to treat people as 'service users' with problems to be 'managed' this can undermine feelings of agency. Delivery at scale can be transactional and disempowering, with people feeling subject to decisions which are beyond their control. [14] Service silos can leave people with multiple needs navigating a complex world of multiple service bureaucracies.

We need public service systems that recognise the complexity of life, and fit services to people, not the other way around; a local approach to commissioning can enable this holistic approach, generate additional social value, and strengthen local economic resilience.[15] Involving people in the decisions about their services and care can have a powerful impact on their own wellbeing, health, sense of autonomy and social connectedness. [16]

Central to a new vision for localism must be an understanding of how poverty and social and economic marginalisation intersect with the ability to participate and exercise agency and control. Whilst the drive to organise, campaign and participate exists in all communities, when the pressures that people are facing mean that they are too busy worrying about surviving to the end of the week, this has a huge impact on participation. In this way, people are effectively excluded from citizenship and power through economic disadvantage.

The hollowing out of community infrastructure experienced by many communities as a result of austerity has made it harder to mobilise the localism agenda. Restitching the fabric of our neighbourhoods requires strengthening these community institutions and organisations, as well as recognising the immense power of informal community activity and connectivity. Ensuring that community organisations and local organising activity has formal engagement with political power including through strong local governance is essential – otherwise it remains possible for the powerful to pick and choose who they listen to.

When connectivity of people to power breaks down, the consequences can be devastating. One of the most painful manifestations of this in our times, was when Grenfell Tower caught fire in West London last year. This tragedy could have been avoided if one of the richest boroughs in the country had listened to its poorest residents.

[14] Locality. (2017). 'Powerful Communities, Strong Economies.' Locality. Available at: http://locality.org.uk/resources/powerful-communities-strong-economies-report/
[15] ibid
[16] See for example New Economics Foundation. (2013). 'Co-production in mental health: a review.' Nef. Available at: http://b.3cdn.net/nefoundation/ca0975b7cd88125c3e_ywm6bp3l1.pdf

What are the sources of community power?

Reinvigorating localism requires a fundamentally different conception of power which puts people and communities at the starting point. Our Commission has gathered evidence on how we build and organise power within communities. We believe that communities are already powerful – often far more than people recognise – but this power can lie latent, untapped, or simply ignored.

Our Commission has heard evidence about what makes a community powerful. We have taken these ideas to develop themes which have informed our understanding of how to unleash and strengthen community power. Fig 1. highlighted some of the key sources of community power that we have heard about. This is by no means an exhaustive list – different communities build and experience power in different ways. Rather we seek to explore the aspects of community power that have emerged through our evidence and which inform our recommendations.
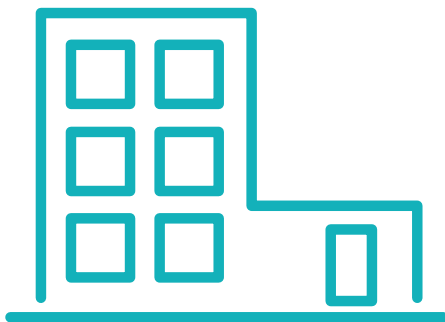
Spaces for being together, for participation and deliberation:

Communities need the spaces and forums to come together, socialise and organise. Democracy thrives on spaces for conversation, connection, shared purpose, debate and resolving differences. Disagreement, conflicting priorities and concerns arise in all communities: powerful communities have the means and routes for addressing these through collective problem-solving.

Connectedness and belonging:

Feeling part of the community where you live can have a positive impact on your personal wellbeing and health, reducing isolation and tackling loneliness.[17] While place is only one aspect of identity, and different people experience belonging in different ways, involvement in local social action can strengthen feelings of community cohesion and generate a greater sense of civic pride and purpose.[18]
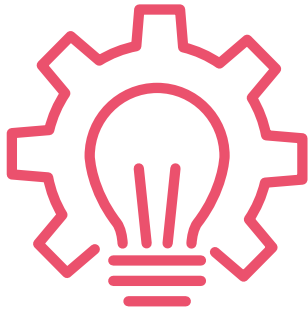
One of the most valuable outcomes of community action is the feeling of collective power, as well as personal agency, that comes with the proof of what can be achieved in partnership with neighbours for a shared purpose.[19] Connectedness and belonging within a community is often associated with 'social capital,' broadly defined by levels of social trust, participation and association, cohesion and collective efficacy.[20]

[17] Public Health England. (2015). 'Social relationships are key to good health'. PHE. Available at:
https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2015/12/08/loneliness-and-isolation-social-relationships-are-key-to-good-health/
[18] McKinnon, E and Green, K. (2015) 'Community Organisers – inspiring people to build a bigger, stronger society.' Cabinet Office [online]. Available at:
https://coanalysis.blog.gov.uk/2015/08/11/community-organisers-inspiring-people-to-build-a-bigger-stronger-society/
[19] Clegg, S. Courpasson, D. and Phillips, N. (2006). 'Power and Organisations.' London: Sage.
[20] Siegler, V. (2016). 'Social Capital Across the UK: 2011 -2012.' ONS. Available at:
https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/socialcapitalacrosstheuk/2011to2012#the-role-of-trust-belonging-and-social-connections-in-communities

People's ideas, creativity, skills and local knowledge:

Community is actively created through social relationships between people.[21] Their ideas, creativity, skills and ways of supporting each other can be powerful. Powerful communities recognise these unique assets, and governance structures are able to harness these for the benefit of people and place.

Equality in participation and voice:

Whilst not everyone within a community will want to get involved in community decision-making structures, powerful communities have equality of opportunity to participate, addressing barriers of resources and economic circumstances, time, and perceived qualifications. Forums for participation, including local governance models, need to be non-hierarchical and enable broad-based participation.
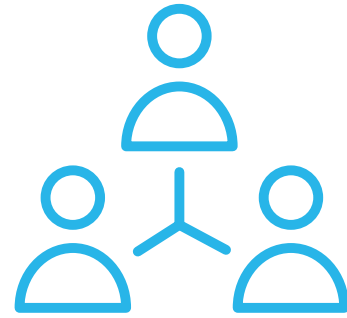
Community governance has meaningful influence:

Powerful communities have effective community governance which has formal and meaningful integration with other tiers of governance.

Economic power:

Having control over economic resources at a local level, including through community ownership of assets and devolved budgets, and having the means to address local priorities and find community-led solutions is critical to community power.

Health and wellbeing:

Healthy and happy citizens with access to good quality services are often better placed for participation. Crucially, meaningful participation and local engagement should fulfil its capacity to lead to greater health and happiness within communities.

[21] Wills, J. (2016). '(Re)locating Community in Relationships: Questions for Public Policy.' The Sociological Review [online]. Available at:
http://web.a.ebscohost.com.gate3.library.lse.ac.uk/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer
?vid=1&sid=89b5e1fa-4c60-4e8e-9c72-374ec7b35b91%40sessionmgr4006

What blocks community power?

Our Commission has heard a breadth of evidence from community organisations, neighbourhood forums, local councils and local authorities, around the blockages and frustrations for the expression of community power.

Top-down decision-making:
When things are 'done to' communities this reinforces a paternalistic relationship between citizens and the state. When collective endeavours are scuppered because 'real power' resides elsewhere at another level of governance or within the private sector, this frustrates community energy and contributes to a sense of powerlessness.

Accountability deficit:
This can occur in any layer of local governance, where accountability is reduced to basic methods of voting and consultations. A lack of a dynamic approach to accountability, which prioritises participation, ongoing relationships and co-creation, can reinforce the status-quo, block new ideas, and lead to a feeling of powerlessness.

Lack of trust and risk aversion:
A lack trust and risk aversion on behalf of public authorities and political leaders can dampen community action.

Lack of access to data and information:
When communities cannot take action or effect the change they want to, because they lack access to local data and information, or lack the capacity to gain ownership and understanding of it. When people feel they cannot contribute to local decision-making because they do not have access to information or the perceived knowledge requirements, this limits power.

Narrow participation:
When community participation is narrow, this can lead to a dominance of those with the loudest voices and those that have the confidence, skills, wealth and time to participate. Even where community governance is led by a small group of passionate and involved members of the community, this still needs to be based on broad-based participation, community engagement and active relationships.

Lack of control of funding and resources:
The ability to get things done, achieve local priorities and re-design local services is often constrained by lack of control over resources. In areas of multiple deprivation particularly impacted by cuts to public spending, this is a significant and compounding barrier to the opportunities of localism.

Strengthening community power: reimagining localism

We require action across all four domains of localism: institutions; powers; relationships; and community capacity.

A fundamental rebalancing of power to people and communities requires more than tinkering around the edges. Localism needs to be approached as part of a complex system which requires radical action. Achieving change in a complex system requires a fundamental shift in attitudes and behaviours, as well as changes to underlying structures and mechanisms which drive how the system operates[22]. Change is required in relationships, resources, policies, power structures and values.

Like all complex systems, the change that's required cannot be achieved through policy and legislative levers alone. We have heard how the connections between the 'formal' institutions and powers of localism and the 'informal' ingredients of supportive relationships and community involvement must be fully aligned if we are to embed localism into our national culture.

Our recommendations are therefore designed to strike a balance between the changes required to the formal structures and processes of localism, with a fundamental recasting of the relationship between citizen and state. The majority of our recommendations are therefore aimed at the behaviour and practices of local government and public bodies. It is at this level that we can achieve the biggest impact in harnessing the power of community to address shared challenges and shape local priorities.

Strengthening community power requires action in four key domains of localism:

Institutions for localism: healthy local governance structures across the country, integrated within wider systems of governance, to ensure that power sticks at the local level.
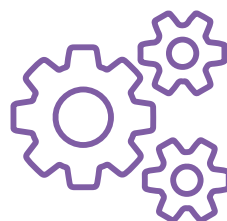
Powers and mechanisms for localism: ensuring there are meaningful powers, levers and resources for communities to take action locally.

Relational localism: changing culture and behaviours requires embracing risk and establishing trust in devolution to communities, local leaders acting as facilitators for community expertise, and disrupting hierarchies.

Capacity for localism: ensuring localism is not the preserve of wealthier communities, or those with the loudest voices, requires building community capacity, supporting community organising, community development and sustainable spaces for participation.

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22 Harries, E. Wharton, R. and Abercrombie, R. (2015). 'Systems Change: A guide to what it is and how to do it.' NPC and Lankelly Chase. Available at: http://www.thinknpc.org/publications/systems-change/

1 Institutions for localism: governance structures

> 66 County and District Councillors meet at distances up to 50 miles away from the residents they are representing, they are not residents of the villages and yet they have the final say"
>
> Parish Council Clerk

Local governance structures are the institutions which can help to ensure that power sticks and is meaningful at the local level. While the ways that people come together can often be organic, bottom-up community initiatives, there still needs to be the governance infrastructure in place to strengthen voice and access to decision making and provide tangible routes for achieving change.

There are many models of neighbourhood governance: localism is not tidy. What has become clear to our Commission is that one size does not fit all when it comes to local governance.

We examined common challenges faced by both democratic institutions (such as parish councils) and community-led governance (such as neighbourhood forums). We found common barriers: lack of fiscal control; decisions blocked from above; and reluctance of other public bodies to embrace the perceived risks of devolution. We also found common internal challenges for local governance: lack of new leadership; partisan interests overriding commitment to place; lack of participation; and inability to effectively engage the community.

Ensuring that local governance structures can sustain and provide routes for local organising is essential to resetting the power balance between citizen and state. Vibrant local governance – with meaningful integration with other tiers of governance – is essential in driving forward a devolution agenda which can empower neighbourhood control over the local economy, public services and planning.

We found that strengthening the institutions of localism requires:

- **Extending the powers which can be designated to neighbourhood forums in non-parished areas.** Neighbourhood forums should be used as a blueprint for other forms of community control beyond neighbourhood planning. They could be a vehicle for strengthening an enhanced framework of Community Rights, including new powers to shape local public services and priorities on local spending.

- **Making it easier in legislation to establish parish councils** with routes of redress when blocked by principal authorities.

- **Supportive behaviours from local authorities and public bodies and a willingness to embrace perceived 'risk' in devolution to neighbourhoods.** A commitment to strengthening the capacity of neighbourhood institutions, supporting them to leverage resources and local assets, and devolving fiscal controls and budgets alongside responsibilities.

- **Supporting community ownership of assets:** including through Community Asset Transfer (CAT) and strengthening the opportunities of the Right to Bid, including creating a genuine 'Community Right to Buy.'

We have developed the following six 'principles of localism' from the evidence we have heard about common challenges in local governance. Whilst our recommendations are not prescriptive in terms of which models of local governance should be used, we believe that whether neighbourhood governance is elected or community-led, it should follow these six principles:

01

People are the end goal of localism: interventions should be judged by the impact they have on people, rather than institutions alone.

02

Equality in local participation: not everybody wants to participate in the same way, but there needs to be equality of consideration and an equal opportunity to participate.

03

Dynamic local accountability: accountability must not be based on consultations and voting alone: it must value ongoing community participation, relationships and local action.

04

Local leadership is built around place: in whichever form, party politicians or community leaders, leadership should be built around place, convening community partnership around shared local concerns.

05

Localism requires meaningful powers and integrated structures: local powers should not be easily dismissed by 'higher' tiers of governance, without clear reasons and means of redress.

06

Economic power must support community responsibility: communities must have the means and resources to match powers and responsibilities, and realise the potential of localism.

2 Powers and mechanisms for localism

> 66 The legislation tries unsuccessfully to balance the needs of the community against the property rights of owners and developers and in so doing fails to give the community any meaningful rights or benefits"

Local Authority Officer,
Community Right to Bid

> 66 We can hardly get our head above the parapet, never mind being able to challenge our Council"

Community group,
Right to Challenge

Salvation Squad – Robin Woolgar photography

A core purpose of our Commission has been to explore the current framework of localism, including formal mechanisms of community power such as the Community Rights. We find that this framework stops short of enabling the fundamental shift in power that is needed.

The success of Community Rights remains too tied to availability of community resources and local capacity, and is dependent on a wider supportive culture and behaviours from local authorities. Therefore, while we make a number of specific recommendations for tightening the legislative framework for localism through the existing Community Rights, this stands alongside our other recommendations across all four domains of localism.

Strengthening the Community Rights framework in legislation requires:

- **Requirements on Councils to actively publicise Community Rights.** Councils need to use a variety of communication channels to directly promote Community Rights, including targeted activity to under-represented communities.

- **A Community Right to Buy.** As operating in Scotland, a genuine Community Right to Buy would give communities first right of refusal to purchase Assets of Community Value (ACV) that come to market. It would provide a 12 month period, once an ACV comes to market, for communities to mobilise, and secure the funding and local support required.

- **Extend Assets of Community Value (ACV) listings.** This would mean that assets of community value would include not only land and buildings, but other local amenities, such as bus companies and football clubs. Disused assets with community potential should also be included. ACVs should be protected from change of use planning applications without requirements to prove that there is no prospect of community use.

- **Replace the Right to Challenge with a 'services partnership power'.** To reflect a collaborative approach to reshaping local public service delivery, parish councils and neighbourhood forums should be able to trigger this power, with statutory responsibility on the local authority to begin a process for community consultation and co-design.

- **Transparency in information available to communities.** Annual accounting of local spend in public procurement, enabling communities to create local plans for how public services could deliver greater social and economic value to the community.

3 Relational localism: changing culture and behaviour

> 66 There is still a culture of deference in many of our towns and cities, and people's expectations of what they can do and influence is really limited. Where people have had a positive experience of being involved in a project, these expectations shift and I think this can be catalytic. In other places where they haven't had this experience there is still this notion of what 'they' do to 'us'"
>
> **Community group,** survey respondent

A technocratic localism will only achieve so much: localism must tap into how people relate to and feel connection with the place where they live. It must be about changing how people feel about participation and engagement with decision-making processes. As Charlotte Alldritt, former Director of Communities and Public Services at the RSA, said in her contribution to our evidence hearings: "In order to have legitimacy, localism must have people shaped parameters."

We need a relational approach to localism which requires changing the culture and behaviours of communities, local councils and local authorities. Resetting the relationship between these actors requires recognising that people and communities (both in terms of informal activities and community action, as well as formalised community organisations and governance) are equal actors as place-shapers alongside elected local leaders.

For example, we heard from Cllr. Peter Macfadyen, author of Flatpack Democracy and founder of Independents for Frome[23], about the community engagement principles of Frome Town Council. They start from the premise that the community already has the expertise, skills and ideas to develop local solutions and it is the role of the councillors to seek this out. They don't make promises about the things they will do for people; instead they aim to create a culture with the community to "stop looking for reasons 'not to' and instead ask the question 'how can we make this happen?'"

We found that a relational approach to localism requires:

- **Removing hierarchies in forums of community decision-making:** The role of local leaders is to harness community expertise and participation. It is possible to create non-hierarchical spaces for community debate and decision-making, including through independent facilitation.

- **A willingness of local authorities to embrace perceived 'risk'** including through devolution of budgets to neighbourhood institutions, and support for Community Asset Transfer (CAT). This would help put local resources and amenities in the hands of local people, galvanise community action, and secure sustainable funding for community institutions.

- **Using co-production in the design and delivery of our public services.** Resetting the relationship between public service agencies, providers and service users through collaboration and co-design.

- **Design collaborative approaches to decision-making in partnership with local community organisations, including groups representing communities of interest:** otherwise there is a risk that these approaches can end up reinforcing disengagement.

- **Communities to reclaim their rights to direct action.** Our Commission has heard that when people are used to being told what they 'can and can't do' this stagnates community action. Ultimately communities need to be free from feeling they require 'permission' to get things done locally: communities must reclaim their right to 'just do it.'

23 For more information, see: http://www.flatpackdemocracy.co.uk/thebook/

4 Capacity for localism: community infrastructure and participation

A core challenge that runs throughout our findings is how to ensure that localism is based on broad participation, involving not just the 'loudest voices'. Whilst community participation thrives on active members of the community – those who are ready and willing to give up their time, their experience and expertise – if this is not supported by broader community participation and involvement, this can skew the representativeness of community decision-making.

This remains a core risk of any initiatives designed to support localism: how to ensure that the capacity is there to respond to a more vibrant neighbourhood governance landscape? How do we ensure that community participation is wide reaching and inclusive?

While the exact mechanism varies, it is clear from the evidence we saw that communities require some form of catalyst to support them in participating and being involved. Formal or informal structures, groups, organisations or institutions can play this role, but this infrastructure is vital in enabling communities to have a voice.

Strengthening community capacity and participation requires partnerships between local government and community institutions:

- **Supporting community organising mechanisms:** building the networks and relationships within communities to develop community voice and action.

- **Supporting community development and 'informal' community activity:** this can re-engage communities who feel powerless and provide the impetus for further community action. Providing the space and time for informal discussions on local issues without a pre-agreed agenda can lead to opportunities to develop other courses for local action.

- **Sustainable spaces for participation:** local authorities can support community spaces for participation, deliberation and community action through community ownership of assets

- **Programmes and resources designed** to specifically enable participation from underrepresented minority groups

- **Involvement of local organisations in public service delivery:** building opportunities for co-production that can support community wellbeing and active citizenship.

Our full evidence and findings

The evidence gathered for this Commission, through expert witnesses, focus groups, written evidence and survey responses, is presented here across four themes: the Localism Act 2011; the devolution agenda; local governance structures; and community capacity and participation.

We have sought to understand communities' experiences of localism, the successes which have been brought about by the Community Rights and the challenges that remain. We have explored the devolution agenda, looking particularly at whether it will deliver greater neighbourhood control. We have examined the key local institutions which are required to deliver localism and embed participation within neighbourhoods.

This evidence has been essential in shaping the recommendations presented in the first half of this report and has underpinned our calls for action across the four domains of localism: institutions; powers; relationships; and community capacity.

The Localism Act 2011

"If central government is everywhere, then local decision-making is nowhere – everything is subject to national politics, with nothing left to community leadership". [1] **The Rt. Hon Greg Clark,** *2010*

The Localism Act 2011 was born from the aspirations of the Coalition Agreement to deliver "an unprecedented redistribution of power and control from the central to the local, from politicians and the bureaucracy to individuals, families and neighbourhoods".[2] The Act introduced a set of rights and powers for communities – the Community Rights – as well as the General Power of Competence for local government.

The Community Rights: formalising community power?

A core strand of the Localism Act was the introduction of new powers for communities – the Community Rights, including the Right to Bid, the Right to Challenge, Neighbourhood Planning and the Right to Build. (See Fig. 3 for more information). These Community Rights established processes and a legislative framework for communities wanting to run local services, protect and own valued local assets, and influence local planning and development decisions.

There have been some powerful examples of how the Community Rights have enabled communities to make real change in their neighbourhoods. We've seen iconic local buildings saved from sale or disrepair – such as Grade II listed Pierremont Hall in Broadstairs[3] and Greenham Control Tower on Greenham Common[4] – and we've seen over 2000 communities involved in developing a Neighbourhood Plan.

However, there are also a number of barriers in using the Community Rights, which have restricted their take up. Through the evidence we have gathered, we identify a number of themes common to all the Community Rights: a lack of information, knowledge and awareness of Community Rights; the community capacity and local resources required to take on the opportunities of Community Rights; and local power imbalances and the importance of local relationships between the local authority and the community.

[1] DCLG. (2010). 'Decentralisation and the Localism Bill: an essential guide.' HM Government. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/5951/1793908.pdf
[2] Cameron, D and Clegg, N. (2010). 'The Coalition: Our programme for government.' HM Government. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/78977/coalition_programme_for_government.pdf
[3] My Community. (2016). 'Parish and Town Council multiple asset transfers: lessons and recommendations from two projects.' My Community. Available at: http://mycommunity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/PTC-COMA-Case-Study.pdf
[4] My Community. (2015). 'Greenham Common Control Tower: Buying and restoring the tower.' My Community [online]. Available at: https://mycommunity.org.uk/case_study/greenham-common-control-tower-buying-and-restoring-the-tower/

Definitions of the existing Community Rights

The Right to Challenge: The Community Right to Challenge is a process for community organisations (including parish and town councils) to submit an expression of interest in running a local service on behalf of the public authority. If the authority accepts the expression of interest, they must then run a procurement exercise for that service. This procurement process is an open competition, where other providers including those from the private sector can also compete to run the service.

The Right to Challenge currently applies to services run by 'relevant authorities' which include: county councils; district councils; borough councils; and some fire and rescue authorities. The Right to Challenge can be evoked by 'relevant bodies' which include voluntary and community sector organisations and parish and town councils.

The Right to Bid: Communities can register land or buildings in their community as Assets of Community Value (ACV) with the local authority. If ever the building and land comes up for sale, the Community Right to Bid can be evoked. This puts a six month pause, or moratorium, on the sale to allow the community to raise funds to buy it. At the end of the six month period, the owner does not have to sell to the community and they can sell at whichever price they chose.

Assets can be nominated as ACVs by a community group connected to the area including a parish council, neighbourhood forum, or a community group with at least 21 individuals involved. ACVs can only be nominated if they have a social use (such as sport, culture or recreation) or if it has a current impact on community wellbeing. Once listed the ACV stays on the register for up to 5 years.

Neighbourhood Planning: A Neighbourhood Plan is a document that sets out the planning policies within a neighbourhood which have been agreed by the people that live there. It is written by members of the community. Once agreed through local referendum, the Neighbourhood Plan forms part of the statutory Development Plan for that area and has to be considered in future planning decisions.

Community Right to Build Order: The Community Right to Build Order is usually, but not always, attached to the Neighbourhood Plan. It provides automatic planning permission once passed through local referendum for community buildings – for example community centres – as well as for local homes and community-led housing. Any profit generated from the development under this Order is reinvested for community benefit.

More information and step-by-step guides to the Community Rights are available from My Community: **mycommunity.org.uk**

Fig 3. Definitions of the existing Community Rights

The Community Right to Bid and Assets of Community Value

Asset of Community Value (ACV) listings have given communities the route to mobilise around much loved local buildings and spaces and fight against unpopular re-development plans, knowing that there is a formal process to back them up. The Long Live Southbank campaign, for example, which successfully listed the much-used and iconic Southbank Undercroft skate park as an ACV – forcing the council to sit up and take notice of the strength of community feeling and putting a stop to the mooted plans by the landowners for retail re-development.[5]

The Community Right to Bid has also been successfully used to give time for the community to gather the funds required to buy an ACV when put up for sale, saving important local amenities such as the Ivy House pub in Nunhead, which was brought with funds in part raised through community shares. [6]

However, there are significant challenges with the Right to Bid legislation, and there is currently no database which tracks how many community buildings listed as ACVs actually become community owned once they come to market.

Crucially, communities do not have a genuine 'Community Right to Buy.' First refusal is not granted to communities, who instead have to compete with commercial bidders at the point of sale. Raising the capital required presents the biggest barrier, and raising the funds within the current window of 6 months is often not enough time to build community support, set up an incorporated organisational structure and governance model, and complete application cycles for funders and investors. As the 2015 Communities and Local Government Committee investigation into the Community Rights highlighted: "bidding for an Asset of Community Value is a complicated process requiring time, organisation, effort and resources to put together business plans and find funding".[7]

Mobilising within these tight timeframes particularly disadvantages more deprived or marginalised communities and restricts their ability to take up the opportunities of the Right to Bid. Research from the Ubele Initiative in partnership with Locality, for example, has mapped the erosion, loss and closure of BAME community spaces, highlighting that governance, time and resource constraints in BAME community groups limits their capacity to use the Right to Bid to take ownership of local assets.[8] This was also highlighted by the Communities and Local Government Committee, warning that the burdens of the Community Right to Bid have a particular impact on disadvantaged communities. [9]

"It [The Community Right to Bid] does not give any right to buy so even if communities are able to put in a bid it is still likely to be rejected because a community bid is unlikely to compete successfully with a commercial bid. The legislation tries unsuccessfully to balance the needs of the community against the property rights of owners and developers and in so doing fails to give the community any meaningful rights or benefits." – **Local Authority Officer,** *survey respondent*

"In reality the asset owners are generally very against the listing of their asset, and raising funds in even a six month period is challenging. Many communities wait until, for example, the pub is under threat of closure to list the asset, which is too late" – **Local Authority Officer,** *survey respondent*

Neighbourhood Planning

Neighbourhood planning has been the most widely used aspect of the Community Rights. To date, over 2000 communities have been involved at some stage of the neighbourhood planning process, representing approximately 12 million people. It has been used by communities wanting to tackle second-home ownership and lack of affordable housing, by using data on local housing need to develop Housing Needs Assessments. Other communities have focused on how spatial planning can improve access to services and employment, such as the Heathfield Park Plan in Wolverhampton[10].

For a Neighbourhood Plan to progress, it must be based on widespread community engagement which culminates in a referendum, securing democratic legitimacy. Our survey responses and written evidence highlighted the success of neighbourhood planning in building a participatory approach to planning and local decision-making, bringing a larger section of the community into decisions around planning.

[5] See: https://mycommunity.org.uk/case_study/long-live-southbank-community-rights-used-to-campaign-to-save-skatepark/
[6] See: https://mycommunity.org.uk/case_study/the-ivy-house-pub-the-first-community-owned-pub/
[7] Communities and Local Government Committee (2015). 'Sixth Report of Session 2014-15: Community Rights.' House of Commons. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmcomloc/262/262.pdf

[8] Field, Y. Murray, K. and Chilangwa Farmer, D. (2015). 'A place to call home: Community asset ownership in the African Diaspora Community.' The Ubele Initiative and Locality. Available at: http://locality.org.uk/resources/place-call-home-community-asset-ownership-african/
[9] Communities and Local Government Committee (2015). 'Sixth Report of Session 2014-15: Community Rights.' House of Commons. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmcomloc/262/262.pdf
[10] See: https://mycommunity.org.uk/case_study/futurehoods-heathfield-park-wolverhampton/

As guidance produced by the Eden Project on community engagement in neighbourhood planning states, "in order to get more people to engage with planning we need to make the process meaningful to their lives and the lives of their families." [11] To achieve community support, neighbourhood planning groups must think creatively about how they engage all parts of the community.

For example, Trull neighbourhood planning group in Somerset, held a community raffle – for which the entry requirement was a completed questionnaire about the local area. Abram neighbourhood planning group in Wigan has used the popular video game 'Minecraft' to get year 5 students at local schools, as well as their parents, involved in thinking about what their neighbourhood plan should look like.[12] Lawrence Weston neighbourhood planning group in Bristol trained local people in community research to knock on over 1000 people's doors to talk to them about what they thought their local neighbourhood needs. [13]

Respondents to our survey pointed to the benefits neighbourhood planning can bring in developing a sense of shared identity and collective action, by mobilising around attachments to place. Other respondents pointed to the neighbourhood planning process being a tool to encourage communities to see the value in new development:

*"In my parish an initial survey showed most residents preferring minimal new housing. Three years later a NP [Neighbourhood Plan] that planned for nearly 300 new houses (well above District demand for the village) received 92% support on a 42% turnout." – **Parish council clerk**, survey respondent*

These cases are borne out by national statistics which demonstrate that across a sample of 39 Neighbourhood Plans which address housing, the housing allocation within these was 11% more than in the Local Plan.[14] An analysis of the first 50 Neighbourhood Plans to be made also demonstrated a near unanimous concern for affordable and sustainable housing, alongside interest in community-led housing initiatives.[15] This demonstrates that despite concerns about being used as a tool for 'NIMBYs,' neighbourhood planning has opened up routes for neighbourhoods to be pro-active about local development challenges to meet local housing needs.

However, two key issues emerged in our evidence around the take up of neighbourhood planning. First, was an emphasis on the types of technical skills and experience required to develop Neighbourhood Plans, and the resources, volunteer time and networks needed to pursue them successfully. This makes the national support programme for communities around neighbourhood planning, including the provision of technical skills free of charge, particularly important.

Evidence points to the predominant picture of neighbourhood planning being more prevalent in middle class areas[16], notwithstanding the examples of neighbourhood planning achieving great success in areas of multiple deprivation. The underrepresentation of disadvantaged areas in neighbourhood planning, also shows how neighbourhood planning should be surrounded by tools and resources which seek to involve populations less likely to engage – such as areas with highly transient populations or low homeownership.

*"[Neighbourhood Planning] pre-supposes a political identity, appetite, desire, time and resilience; few places have all that from the get-go." – **VCSE support organisation**, survey respondent.*

The second key issue is a recurring theme throughout our evidence of communities feeling that planning and local development is still largely led by the local authority, despite neighbourhood planning powers. Locality's work supporting communities to develop neighbourhood plans has also shown poor practice from local authorities including: misinformation; statements that Neighbourhood Plans will not be taken into account in making planning decisions; and delaying or failing to deal with applications for the designation of neighbourhood areas. Modifications at examination stage of the Neighbourhood Plan, for example, can also include changes which entirely alter the overall objectives of the Neighbourhood Plan. This can frustrate and undermine community efforts, passion and motivation.

*"Some progress on Neighbourhood Planning, but the ideas and passions to change and improve things is undermined by planning issues and control from the centre." – **Community group**, survey respondent*

[11] The Eden Project. (2015). 'Neighbourhood planning community consultation.' My Community. Available at: https://mycommunity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Neighbourhood-planning-community-consultation-final.pdf
[12] Ibid
[13] Ibid
[14] DCLG. (2016). 'Neighbourhood Planning: progress on housing delivery.' DCLG. Available at: http://6 mycommunity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/161013-made-neighbourhood-plan-housing-delivery_Oct2016.pdf
[15] Field, M. and Layard, A. (2017) 'Locating community-led housing within neighbourhood plans as a response to 10 England's housing needs', Public Money and Management, 37(2): 105-112. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2016.1266157

[16] Parker, G. and Salter, K. (2016) 'Five years of Neighbourhood Planning. A review of take-up and distribution', Town and 8 Country Planning, 85(5): 181-188. Available at: http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/65602/

The Right to Challenge

The Right to Challenge, amongst all the Community Rights, stands out as having had little or no impact, with very few examples of the Right being used.

The process of submitting an Expression of Interest (EOI) to initiate the Right to Challenge can be considered antagonistic and damaging to the relationship between the community group and the public authority. Written evidence received from the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) described how in the experiences of their members, the Right to Challenge can actually replicate and exacerbate tensions between local councils and principal authorities.

"We intended to make use of the CRTC [Community Right to Challenge] in order to take over the running of that service. When I phoned to ask for the name of the officer responsible, my enquiry was met with laughter (literally). I was told that there was no officer and that they had not been anticipating any challenge." – **Community organisation,** *survey respondent.*

Respondents highlighted that where there is a supportive council which promotes and values bottom-up community activity and community involvement in public service design and delivery, the Right to Challenge is an unnecessary and unsuitable process. However, where the council is unsupportive, the Right to Challenge is not sufficient to overcome these hurdles. Community groups referred to a 'culture of denial' in their local authority in the way they pay lip-service to community delivery and involvement in public service delivery; and others pointed to a resistance to change and a reluctance to 'let go' in their local authorities.

"Local authorities, with some minor exceptions, have not made the process easy, so local communities/local councils are reluctant to spend resources in putting together a bid. Furthermore, few are actually aware of what it entails i.e. you are, in effect, tendering. Most local councils preferred to enter into direct negotiations with the local authority to take over the service." – **Warwickshire Association of Local Councils (WALC),** *written evidence*

In addition, the procurement process triggered by a successful EOI is open to all potential providers, including those from the private sector. This has caused concern about 'privatisation by the back door' – as one survey respondent put it: "No-one wants to use it lest the bad guys win the resulting tender process." The Right to Challenge has had no impact in addressing the trend towards scale and outsourcing to the private sector, and has proved an inappropriate route for greater collaboration between local authorities and communities to support better service design.

Conclusions from our evidence on Community Rights

Community Rights are not yet universally known and understood by communities, local councils and local government alike. Written evidence and survey respondents highlighted that for Community Rights to have a transformational impact, access to greater knowledge, information and awareness is crucial.

"The truth is that most communities are not even aware of the possibilities that exist, let alone possessing of the means, leadership and community spirit at the local level to carry them out." – **NALC,** *written evidence*

This lack of awareness of the Community Rights was prevalent across our survey. It was most stark in the Right to Challenge. Over a quarter of respondents highlighted either a lack of examples of the Right to Challenge being used, or that they had not heard of the Right at all. This is reflected in the high proportion of respondents (66%) reporting that the Right to Challenge had been either 'moderately unsuccessful' or having 'no impact.' (For full survey results, please see Appendix).

The importance of community capacity to make use of Community Rights, including the resources and time to develop and harness local skills and networks, was a key theme of our evidence.

The Localism Act was introduced at a time of public sector cuts, which has put immense pressure on the health and capacity of local civil society, not to mention local government. Alongside this, the Big Society agenda which shaped much of the Coalition Government's communities policy development was not tied to a programme of significant investment for capacity building commensurate with the scale of the challenge.

In creating a 'menu of options' for communities through the Localism Act, the Coalition Government moved away from area-based initiatives around neighbourhood renewal focusing on areas of multiple deprivation. The Coalition Government's approach to localism has been based on the creating opportunities for all communities – to 'let 1000 flowers bloom' – rather than targeted initiatives. However, a consequence of this hands-off approach is the creation of inequalities of participation in the Community Rights framework across communities.

The importance of local context: behaviours and support from local authorities. Our Commission has heard how the success of Community Rights is often dependent on the broader culture of the local authority and their support for community-led activity.

We heard many examples in our survey, written evidence, and evidence events, of community-led decisions made as part of the Community Rights framework being stymied by another level of governance. For example, Neighbourhood Plans being blocked by the planning authority or ACVs being rejected by the council without means of redress. The balance between commercial sector and communities' interests is also a core challenge: for example, a process of appeal for landowners exists to appeal an ACV listing, but not for the community. This creates huge frustrations for communities, and dampens motivation, enthusiasm and passion.

The possibilities of localism extend far beyond the framework of Community Rights, and stem from a willingness of local authorities to embrace and develop community-led approaches. We have heard that a proactive and positive local government attitude to community-led approaches, for example in public service delivery or community asset ownership, is far more important than the Right to Bid or Right to Challenge in itself.

Kirklees Council, for example, have demonstrated visionary local public-sector leadership through their Community Asset Transfer (CAT) strategy, including freehold transfers, revenue support and a loan offer for groups taking on assets, [17] which will also save the council an estimated £1 million.[18] Another example is Bristol City Council who are developing their procurement strategy to reflect the importance of sustaining economic resilience and community organisations, to ensure that hyper-local economies retain spending and build community prosperity.[19] Local authorities that have embraced the opportunities of the Social Value Act 2012, have been able to deliver added social value in public service delivery through community-led approaches and leveraging the resources and expertise of civil society into commissioning.[20]

[17] Kirklees Council. (2017). 'Community Asset Transfer Policy.' Kirklees Council. Available at: http://www.kirklees.gov.uk/beta/community-assets/pdf/asset-transfer-policy.pdf

[18] http://www.examiner.co.uk/news/west-yorkshire-news/how-council-taxpayers-kirklees-saved-13929040

[19] Locality. (2017). 'Powerful Communities, Strong Economies.' Locality. Available at: http://locality.org.uk/resources/powerful-communities-strong-economies-report/

[20] SEUK. (2016). 'Procuring for Good: How the Social Value Act is being used by local authorities.' SEUK. Available at: https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=e3c5b57a-929b-4d99-933d-b2317376d8cd

Amending the Community Rights framework:

We recommend a genuine Community Right to Buy to replace the Right to Bid. Even wider take up of the Community Right to Bid could be achieved through the adoption of a genuine Community Right to Buy model – with a first right of refusal for communities interested in acquiring land of community value. In Scotland, the equivalent legislation on registration of community interests in land allows for the community group to have first right of refusal in purchasing the listed asset – referred to as the Community Right to Buy.[21] They have eight months to raise the funds for the purchase and an independent valuation is done to ensure that the owner receives a fair price at 'market value.'

We recommend that a new Community Right to Buy would include a moratorium period of twelve months. Instead of the current six months, communities would have up to one year to mobilise to purchase ACVs. This extension could be accompanied by new requirements on prospective bidders to demonstrate reasonable progress towards fundraising the capital required as well as evidence which demonstrates serious intent. This would not overburden community groups, who will have evidence they can draw upon from community consultations and funding applications. This would also then provide reassurance to the landowner that there is a high likelihood that a bid will be submitted within the extended timeframe.

Under the Community Right to Buy, the definition of Assets of Community Value (ACV) would be extended to include: not only land and buildings, but other local amenities, such as bus companies and football clubs. Disused assets with community potential should also be included. ACVs should be protected from change of use planning applications without requirements to prove that there is no prospect of community use.

We recommend that the Right to Challenge be replaced with a 'services partnership power.' This would reflect a partnership approach to reshaping local public service delivery, rather than the oppositional stance of the Right to Challenge. This would allow parish councils and neighbourhood forums to trigger the 'services partnership power' over a local service, and there would be responsibility on the local authority to begin a process for a joint service review panel with local providers, local organisations, service users and commissioners. There would be a set period of community consultation and co-design, with a further potential trigger for a full procurement exercise as a result of this.

[21] The Scottish Government. (2016). 'Community Right to Buy: Guidance for Applications made on or after 15 April 2016.' The Scottish Government. Available at: http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0049/00497288.pdf

The Localism Act and the General Power of Competence

The General Power of Competence introduced through the Localism Act gives local government "the power to do anything that individuals generally may do." Prior to this, local government was only able to act within their specific statutory powers. The legislation was designed to allow councils to undertake innovative activity and was intended to be an enabling framework for local authorities. [22] It represented a significant shift in the decentralisation of power and indeed brought the UK's local government legislation more closely in line with many of our European neighbours.[23] It covers all levels of local government; however, parish councils have to fulfil eligibility criteria, including having two-thirds of members elected and training course requirements for the parish clerk.

A key frustration for parish and town councils expressed throughout our evidence has been that despite the permissive nature of the General Power of Competence, principal authorities are still able to block locally-led decisions. One rural local council in Lincolnshire, for example, outlined their frustration at not being able to shape how tourism could have a more positive impact on their local economy: "With the current system, County and District Councillors meet at distances up to 50 miles away from the residents they are representing, they are not residents of the villages and yet have the final say."

We heard evidence from Councillor Peter MacFadyen of Frome Town Council, author of *Flatpack Democracy* and founder of Independents for Frome, that while they have developed a transformative approach to participatory decision-making in their town, local decisions can still be trumped from above. As Peter MacFadyen described, the key problem with the localism agenda is that the definition of what is 'local' is often wrong – with 'local' seeming to stick at the principal authority level. Whereas in reality, it tends to be at the more hyper-local level where attachments to place are at their most resonant, and where community action can be most powerful.

Written evidence from parish and town councils also highlighted that when there is greater devolution to local areas, this can often be driven by a cuts agenda from above which is not accompanied by the partnership and support required to design effective local solutions. NALC outline this trend in their evidence highlighting how greater responsibilities on first tier councils come with top-down conditions from principal authorities, rather than a productive dialogue: "Usually it is that the service will stop or the building or open space will be sold off and possibly developed if the local council does not step in."

Whilst the General Power of Competence has offered a framework to enable the wider culture change needed for localism, the challenge remains in strengthening governance capacity at a local level which is integrated into other layers of governance, in order to provide tangible tools to realise the opportunities of localism.

Fiscal devolution to local government: an unresolved tension

Fiscal devolution – the powers to raise and spend money at a local level – still lags significantly behind decentralisation policy in the U.K. The Communities and Local Government Committee have found, for example, that the proportion of tax set at a sub national level in the U.K. is only approximately 2.5% of GDP, compared with, for example, 15.9% in Sweden, 10.9% in Germany, and 5.8% in France.[24] They argue that without fiscal devolution "local authorities will be agencies of central Government, focused in large measure on the requirements set by the funder, central Government, and acting within spending constraints set by Whitehall." [25] A key theme from our written evidence has been the frustrations from all layers of local government, in not having the financial controls to address local priorities.

Local authorities are required to meet a huge number of statutory demands determined by national legislation, including core services such as children in care and home and residential care for the elderly and disabled. A 2011 DCLG review into these statutory requirements compiled a list of 1339 statutory duties on local authorities, governed by central government departments.[26] Yet the spending powers to match these responsibilities have not yet caught up.

[22] DCLG. (2011). 'Localism Bill: summary impact assessment.' DCLG. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6036/1829702.pdf
[23] Sandford, M. (2016). 'Briefing Paper: the General Power of Competence.' House of Commons Library. Available at: http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05687/SN05687.pdf

[24] Communities and Local Government Committee. (2014). 'First report of Session 2014-15: Devolution in England: the case for local government.' House of Commons. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmcomloc/503/503.pdf
[25] ibid
[26] DCLG. (2011). 'Review of local government statutory duties: summary of responses.' DCLG. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-local-government-statutory-duties-summary-of-responses—2

A key objective of the 'devolution revolution' agenda spearheaded by George Osborne, was to make local government financially 'self-sufficient' by 2020, primarily through business rates retention, and phasing out of the centrally funded Revenue Support Grant. However, the 2017 General Election saw the axing of the Local Government Finance Bill, and delays to the original timescales. This delay, whilst adding great uncertainties for local authorities, must also be an opportunity to address the potential inequities that could be mainstreamed into the local government finance system. There is a fear that areas of greater deprivation, which have higher pressures on local services and have a weaker local business tax-base to generate income from, will lose out from the new system.

The debate over business rates retention shows that we need to be mindful of a new fiscal settlement that reinforces existing inequalities. However, as Professor Tony Travers notes, "Britain has the most centralised tax-setting arrangements of any major democracy ... Indeed the degree of centralisation suggests that Britain's national politicians have little confidence that our democracy can work effectively other than when in the hands of grandees in Westminster and Whitehall."[27] So with civic leaders increasingly calling for greater tax raising powers, we have an opportunity to redesign the tax system from the bottom-up - so that it starts from the perspective of supporting local flourishing rather than sustaining the priorities of the Treasury.

The devolution agenda

The devolution agenda over the last four years has been primarily focused on the creation of combined authorities, with 'devolution deals' being reached in Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, Cornwall, Sheffield City Region, Tees Valley, West of England, the West Midlands, North of Tyne and London.

In setting out the process for devolution deals, central government emphasised the 'bottom up' nature of the devolution process: local areas were invited to join together to design devolution settlements and make proposals to the Treasury. Yet, despite this, many powers were considered 'off the menu' and the process of approving and amending potential devolution deals lacked transparency.[28] In addition, central government preference for a metro-mayoral model has failed to reflect the needs and requirements of different places, and the range of governance structures which might be more suitable. Indeed, in some areas, citizens had actually voted against having an elected mayor when they had been asked to vote on it a few years previously. Centrally imposed models, without other fundamental democratic shifts in local participatory models, can reinforce the impression that devolution is just 'another layer of politicians.'

The core objective of our Commission's scrutiny of devolution deals has been to consider their capacity in terms of strengthening local accountability, community participation, and enabling greater neighbourhood control.

Devolution is at an early stage, but there is a need to take action now to ensure it can be transformative, with more dynamic accountability structures, and a governance model which places greater emphasis on the powers and resources which can be held at a local level. Without this focus, devolution risks widening the gulf between citizens and politicians.

*"The devolution of decision making and managing public services to lower levels of institutions and organisations needs to be distinguished from the processes needed to enable communities and neighbourhoods which are impacted by those decisions to be fully involved in the process leading up to the decisions." **Eileen Conn, Peckham Vison,** written evidence*

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[27] Travers, T. (2015). 'A hyper-centralised anomaly: why the UK must embrace tax devolution.' In D. Srblin. Tax for our Times. The Fabians. Available at: http://www.fabians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Tax-for-our-Times-July-2015.pdf

[28] NAO. (2017.) 'Progress in setting up combined authorities.' NAO. Available at: https://www.nao.org.uk/report/progress-in-setting-up-combined-authorities/

Accountability and local participation

Scrutiny through the integration of tiers of governance is an essential part of the accountability mechanisms of new combined authority structures. However, this is highly dependent on the ability of local councillors to provide this function. The National Audit Office (NAO) have identified the capacity of councillors to provide oversight and scrutiny of combined authorities as a key risk. [29] The Cities and Local Devolution Act 2016 requires the establishment of scrutiny committees within combined authorities, however councillors fulfil this role in addition to their existing responsibilities, which the NAO finds has "implications for their overall ability to function." [30]

This is also a theme which has emerged through our Commission's evidence. One local authority officer, for example, outlined their concern that a metro-mayoral governance structure intended to increase accountability, will in reality diminish the role of local councillors by 'scaling-up' focus on accountability to a less local level. We also heard oral evidence from Ed Cox, Director of IPPR North, who called for the establishment of local public accounts committees, at local authority and combined authority level, which could provide an open and transparent process for scrutinising value for money and effectiveness of place-based spending.

Devolution needs to be accompanied by a broader and more dynamic understanding of accountability, which incorporates citizen participation and involvement. Devolution to neighbourhoods in partnership with local leaders, civil society and community institutions, would help to strengthen community engagement across devolution deal areas.

We require a more dynamic understanding of what accountability means in the context of devolution.

Devolution needs to be about more than localised decision-making structures, it needs to strengthen the ability of communities to be involved in the early stages of decision-making and in shaping policy. Ultimately, the devolution agenda to date lacks this focus on neighbourhood participation and community engagement. Instead of arguing for 'onward devolution' as part of the existing framework of decentralisation policy, we need to be making a clear case for powers to start at the neighbourhood level.

The local economy

As Coops UK note in their written evidence to this Commission: "To have a truly inclusive economy everyone needs to enjoy economic agency and opportunity, including people in more disadvantaged communities. A significant motivation for both localism and devolution is the belief that such inclusivity is more likely if political economies become more locally orientated."

Devolution has the potential, in theory at least, to rebalance our national economy, and give people more of a stake in, and control over, their local economies. However, a predominant focus of government's devolution agenda to date has been to drive economic growth nationally, and strengthen regional economies.[31] The focus of this has been primarily through new investment packages for City Regions, and the role of devolution in strengthening local economies beyond city centres in our towns and villages, has so far been overlooked in the devolution agenda.

This disconnection between City Regions and local decision-making and control over the local economy was prevalent throughout our evidence events. A neighbourhood forum in Birkenhead, for example, explained how they felt "within the shadow of Liverpool" in the Liverpool City Region. Despite having an ambitious community-led plan for developing the local economy, they are concerned that all new investment and resources will be focused on the city. We also heard oral evidence from Steve Conway from Collyhurst Big Local, about the importance of connecting their community economic plan into the Greater Manchester Combined Authority priorities: "We cannot encourage people to be involved if we can't influence the long term plan for the area".

It is essential that the focus on city growth does not side line the potential to develop more dynamic local economies; without this, devolution risks embedding inequities in economic development.[32]

*"Devolution deals appear to be at a regional scale and of no relevance here. There is a risk that the term 'localism' can be taken to mean 'regional authorities', and become another box-ticking exercise." – **Community organisation,** written evidence*

[29] NAO. (2017.) 'Progress in setting up combined authorities.' NAO. Available at: https://www.nao.org.uk/report/progress-in-setting-up-combined-authorities/
[30] NAO. (2017.) 'Progress in setting up combined authorities.' NAO. Available at: https://www.nao.org.uk/report/progress-in-setting-up-combined-authorities/

[31] HM Treasury. (2015). 'Chancellor unveils 'devolution revolution.' Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/chancellor-unveils-devolution-revolution
[32] Berry, C. (2016). 'The Resurrected Right and the Disoriented Left.' Available at: http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/SPERI-Paper-27-The-Resurrected-Right-and-Disoriented-Left.pdf

Devolution should be an opportunity for community-led solutions to shape the local economy.

Tools such as community economic development plans, for example, bring residents, local businesses, civil society and the public sector together to determine priorities for local economic change[33]. Procurement of local organisations in public service delivery can also be a powerful agent for strengthening the local economy[34] and devolution should provide an opportunity for enabling greater whole-place thinking in public services, including how procurement and commissioning spend can be used to improve the local economy.

The role for civil society

Engagement with civil society organisations is essential to ensure devolution can grow local democracy, strengthen local economies, and support public service transformation.

Written evidence from Cornwall County Council, for example, advocates a place-based approach to citizen engagement. They highlight how the combined authority level can seem distant and irrelevant; devolution should provide an opportunity to have conversations on a local level about how devolution can benefit people, and civil society is a key facilitator for this.

However, research from NCVO has shown that civil society engagement in devolution to date has been weak. In a survey of 249 voluntary and community sector organisations, 84% said their organisation has not contributed in any way to the development or delivery of devolution plans in their area. The most common reason cited by respondents for not engaging in the devolution process was a lack of awareness (45%). This was followed by a lack of engagement by local government (40%) and a lack of time and resources (27%).[35]

Despite this overall picture, we have also heard positive examples of civil society involvement in new devolved structures. The VCSE Reference Group for Greater Manchester, for example, has recently signed a memorandum of understanding with the Mayor of Greater Manchester. This makes commitments to co-designing policy, with representation of the Reference Group on key boards within the Combined Authority, and a review of community development and asset based approaches in Manchester. Warren Escadale CEO of Voluntary Sector North West, who gave evidence to our Commission, highlighted that whilst it could be argued that this is a 'technocratic approach to civil society involvement', without these formal mechanisms it is difficult to achieve the wider culture change needed.

Building the scrutiny capacity of civil society and local institutions is also essential to strengthening accountability. Ed Cox of IPPR North highlighted how local think tanks are able to use local data and information, provide research based on localised analysis, and strengthen scrutiny of local issues.

Civil society has an essential role to play in making sure that devolution works for people and communities.

Local community organisations play a vital role in supporting community engagement, public service transformation and local economic development. Devolution deals should include tangible commitments to co-design with local civil society organisations – including in public service commissioning and local economic strategies.

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[33] For more information, please see: https://mycommunity.org.uk/take-action/community-economic-development/
[34] Locality. (2017). 'Powerful Communities, Strong Economies.' Locality. Available at: http://locality.org.uk/resources/powerful-communities-strong-economies-report/
[35] NCVO. (2017). 'Local needs, local voices: building devolution from the ground up.' NCVO. Available at: https://www.ncvo.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/1760-ncvo-no-further-devo-deals-without-local-charities-involvement

Local governance structures

Local governance structures are the institutions which can help to ensure that power 'sticks' and is meaningful at the local level. Whilst organising is possible everywhere, when it is stymied by 'higher' bodies saying no, this reinforces a sense of powerlessness. Ensuring that local governance structures can sustain and provide routes for local organising is therefore essential in resetting the power balance between citizen and state. While the ways that people come together are often organic, there still needs to be the governance infrastructure in place to strengthen voice and access to decision-making and provide tangible routes for achieving change.

All communities should have access to the institutions which support local democracy and provide vehicles for community action.

Strengthening neighbourhood governance is essential in the context of the devolution agenda

Without meaningful institutions for localism at a neighbourhood level, devolution risks perpetuating power imbalances and an uneven economic model, and misses opportunities to transform local services and local economies.

Parish and town councils

Parish and town councils, with statutory powers and the ability to raise a precept, can manage local amenities, services and assets and mobilise community activities. They also often reflect recognised boundaries which directly connect with community identity. They are less common in urban areas, although there are some excellent examples of urban parishes being established, such as Queen's Park in West London. In some unitary authorities, such as Cornwall, local councils provide the key unit of local governance, and are the key structure for local devolution and local service delivery.

However, we have also heard evidence from local councils who are unable to impact change at their local level, because they lack the required fiscal capacity or else the statutory powers lie within another layer of governance. For parish councils without the General Power of Competence, their ability to enhance community control is also lessened. We have heard how this can lead to a perception of local councils as ineffective or redundant units of governance within the community, and can be a barrier to greater participation from the community, dampening local democratic potential.

Strengthening the capacity of parish councils – including the resources that they can leverage – is key to ensuring a vibrant local governance framework which can carry the opportunities of localism. We have seen supportive behaviours of principle authorities in this regard. Broadland District Council, for example, are developing a strategy to support their parish councils to maximise the impact of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding which they are entitled to, including support for creating sustainable local projects and community enterprise through this funding.

The question of the relevance of party politics in local governance has also been a key theme of discussion throughout this Commission. We have heard from advocates of removing party politics from local governance. Councillor Peter MacFadyen, for example, has reflected how removing party politics from the local system can unlock 'creative unity' and can help reframe local leadership around facilitation of community expertise. One of our Commissioners, Neil Johnston CEO of Paddington Development Trust, also reflects on how the success in establishing Queen's Park Parish Council was in uniting members around civic responsibility to place, rather than party politics. However, in our evidence events, it was also discussed that local decisions around how resources are spent are almost always 'political' in their prioritisation of need.

Above all, we have heard how embedding participatory democracy and community development in local governance is vitally important: deliberative, participatory, and place-based local democracy can unlock creativity, unity and community energy and harness the skills and tools for citizens to lead change in their local area.

Case study of Frome Town Council

The principles of engagement deployed by Frome Town Council are that it is the community that has the expertise, skills and ideas, and it is the role of councillors to seek this out. Frome used community panels for decisions on different things – going where people are, into more informal settings, having proper consultations in accessible venues that people go to and feel comfortable. They also make use of participatory budgeting tools to have conversations with the community and make joint decisions about how local budgets are spent.

They also use professional facilitators for engagement – this is crucial to ensuring that all people are heard, not just those with the loudest voices. They wanted to create a new approach to getting things done locally, where they stop looking for reasons 'not to' and instead ask the question 'how can we make this happen.'

Neighbourhood forums

Neighbourhood forums are governance structures which have been introduced to enable areas that don't have parish or town councils to pursue a Neighbourhood Plan. A neighbourhood forum can be set up by 21 resident members and is 'designated' by the principal authority, establishing local powers over planning and land use.

Respondents to our survey and written evidence highlight the potential of this governance model, beyond neighbourhood planning. There is appetite from existing neighbourhood forums to continue working in their communities post neighbourhood planning referendum and Neighbourhood Plan, so as not to waste the community energy and participation that has been developed around planning. This process has huge potential for local democracy and in establishing a governance structure for neighbourhood planning in non-parished areas.

"Yes communities become fatigued but it is also a waste to let that capacity and all groups have achieved fizzle away once a plan is adopted. We need to think about what else we can do at a neighbourhood level." – **Neighbourhood planning researcher,** *survey respondent*

"Referenda [should] be used to enlist more community empowerment. By way of example, budget matters, healthcare provisions, access (or lack thereof) to basic services." – **Parish Councillor,** *survey respondent*

The neighbourhood forum model should be extended by devolving other powers to designated forums, building on and strengthening existing Community Rights.

There should be scope for increasing powers which designated forums could take on around spending and service delivery, following negotiations with the local authority. The process for designation would need to include robust scrutiny, and assurances around community engagement and accountability.

Our Place and Community Budgets

Our Place and Neighbourhood Community Budgets were programmes established alongside the Localism Act to devolve pooled public service budgets to a neighbourhood level to encourage collaboration and co-design between public service providers and community organisations and service users. The Department for Communities and Local Government described the programme as "a fundamental part of the government's approach to localism", which would support communities "to design and deliver local services that focus on local priorities and reduce costs."[36]

However, whilst working well in areas with strong existing community organisations, evaluation of some Neighbourhood Community Budgets found that a lack of civic infrastructure and community voice impeded some programmes[37]. The evaluation of the Our Place programme found that the programme did not generate truly pooled budgets, rather a patchwork of existing funding was levered from multiple sources. It also found that the continuation of the work developed under Our Place, whilst still operating, is precarious and reliant on grant funding. Key barriers during the programme were the reluctance of political leaders and statutory agencies to embrace the radical change necessary. [38]

Dr. David Sweeting, an expert witness to our Commission, has highlighted three key objectives that underpin local governance: to strengthen citizen participation; bolster accountability; and improve neighbourhood services and conditions. His research highlighted common challenges across all models of neighbourhood governance:

- The capacity that is established in neighbourhood institutions, including resources
- The preparedness and willingness of other services to work with neighbourhood models of governance
- Citizen involvement: pressures on time can result in inequalities and skew the representativeness of neighbourhood institutions
- Equity concerns: different levels of support and provision within and between neighbourhoods.

[36] DCLG. (2013). £4.3 million boost to put communities in control' Press Release [online]. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/43-million-boost-to-put-communities-in-control
[37] Wills, J. (2016). 'Locating Localism'. Available at: https://policypress.co.uk/locating-localism
[38] Lee, B. (2016). 'Evaluating Our Place.' My Community. Available at: https://mycommunity.org.uk/resources/_trashed/

Community capacity and participation

A core challenge for localism is in ensuring that it is based on broad participation, involving not just the 'loudest voices,' but all members of the local community. While community participation thrives on active members of the community – those who are ready and willing to give up their time, their experience and expertise – if this is not supported by broader community participation and involvement, this can skew the representativeness of community decision-making.

The level of community capacity and strength of local infrastructure to support community action and local organising is also a key challenge for localism. We need to ensure that all local areas are able to respond to the opportunities of localism, by strengthening community institutions and providing forums for community participation.

What are the drivers of, and barriers to, community participation?

There is a wealth of studies that have sought to understand the root drivers and factors involved in community participation. The 'Pathways through Participation' project – funded by Big Lottery and delivered by NCVO, Involve and Institute for Volunteering Research - for example, summarises how participation is determined by motivations, resources and opportunities. Motivations include identity, values, beliefs and how connected people feel to the place where they live. Resources might be practical resources (time, money, access to transport), but also include felt resources, such as confidence and a sense of efficacy, and social resources, such as networks and local relationships. Opportunities for participation refers to the shape of local institutions and politics - how effective and open are local groups, organisations, community spaces and events?[39]

Recent research as part of Local Trust's 'Empowered Communities 2020' project, has also highlighted how barriers to getting involved in community activities include a lack of confidence and feelings of despondency, as well as lack of time due to working or caring responsibilities. Worry about money, paying bills and living in poverty is also a key constraint to getting involved in your local community.[40] When people are focused on surviving through the week, this limits their likelihood of getting involved in local activity; as one participant at one of our evidence events put: "My community wouldn't even think of grasping any power from anywhere, [they're] too busy with living".

Collyhurst Big Local – addressing barriers to participation

We heard from Steve Conway at Collyhurst Big Local about their approach to addressing social and economic barriers to participation. They established a partnership with Gateway Debt Advice and Money Education Centre to support local people with debt, welfare and housing issues. They recognised that if people are worried about money and housing security, they are not necessarily in the 'right place' to be getting involved in community-led initiatives.

Building 'community confidence.'

At our evidence events, there was discussion about how to build the 'community confidence' required to embed localism into the culture of our neighbourhoods. One of our expert witnesses, Charlotte Alldritt, former Director of Public Services and Communities at the RSA, emphasised that in order to build participation in localism, it is essential to first engage people by developing their sense that they are able to change things. Developing personal agency around making change within a neighbourhood can also build a sense of capacity for being involved in wider change, and can build civic and democratic capital.

"People engage and participate in their community when they know how to, when they get support, when the facilitation gives feedback and motivates. Generally without this the ownership and passion can diminish and the state once more takes control as they have all the resources and time to manage the agendas. We invest millions in economic development but virtually nothing in the development of social capital." – **Community group,** survey respondent.

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39 Involve, NCVO, IVR. Pathways to Participation [online]. Available at: https://www.involve.org.uk/programmes/pathways/

40 Local Trust. (2017). Empowered Communities 2020. [online]. Available at: http://localtrust.org.uk/assets/images/assets/uploads/IVAR_EC2020_Issues_Report_FINAL_210917.pdf

Community engagement: a spectrum of participation

We have heard throughout our evidence how participation and community involvement should be viewed as a spectrum: anyone should be able to be as involved as they want to be. However, the opportunities for 'transformational engagement' must be built and embedded.

Community engagement can range from transactional engagement, which might include broad dissemination of information, and awareness of opportunities to engage further. For example, local ballots and referenda might play a key part in providing a 'democratic stamp' on local decisions. However, this should be accompanied by wider community engagement and development work to ensure that there is broader scope for shaping decisions. At the more 'transformational' side of the spectrum, this involves integration of the community into decision making and problem solving.

The role of local organisations

Community organisations play an essential role in supporting capacity for localism though community development, community organising, local engagement, and providing the spaces and forums which can provide a catalyst for local action.

Local organisations also provide routes for connecting local governance structures and public bodies with communities.

Strengthening the capacity of local organisations is essential to ensure equal opportunities for communities to be able to mobilise around the opportunities of localism. At our first evidence event, Kunle Olulode, Director at Voice for Change, emphasised the need to strengthen the capacity of BAME led organisations, and to ensure BAME representation in community leadership. For example, in the context of gentrification in inner city areas, strengthening BAME groups, including through community asset ownership, can help to give local people the tools and capacity to mobilise around community-led regeneration.

Knowle West Media Centre, Bristol - using digital technology for community participation

Knowle West Media Centre (KWMC) has been based in Knowle West, Bristol for 22 years. They use traditional and digital media and data to find creative ways of getting the community involved in local issues – including food production and health and wellbeing. They focus on developing digital literacy, skills and training, and business and enterprise development. They work particularly with young people and those at risk of exclusion and least likely to participate in decision-making and city life.

Their approach is that "everyone is an expert" and solutions to local problems can be found in the community. They aim to create spaces where a range of stakeholders in the community can have conversations without hierarchy. A core aim is that involvement in projects builds an improved sense of agency and self-determination felt by participants.

'Junior Digital Producers' at KWMC

The 'Junior Digital Producers' (JDPs) are local young people wanting to develop creative skills and industry experience. They created a visual online platform to display community-generated data as a community engagement tool – highlighting prevalent local issues, and generating community conversations about how the local area is changing.

By making data more accessible, the JDPs aimed to create a single place where members of the community could both input and access information about their community, but without using pie charts or spreadsheets to visualize this information. In order to make the collection and visualization of this information engaging, they decided to create interactive games and use animated infographics to collect, display and explore the data. From the last three programmes of this kind 88% of Junior Digital Producers progressed into employment or self-employment.

Devolving budgets

Devolving budgets to communities is also a vital enabler of local change. The Big Local programme, for example, funded by Big Lottery and managed by Local Trust, has demonstrated the impact of this approach. As Big Lottery have highlighted in their written evidence, this programme: "puts residents themselves in charge of spending funding to improve their community, from introducing training and employment schemes, to tackling anti-social behaviour, creating new community facilities, and providing more activities for young people." As Matt Leach, CEO of Local Trust, highlighted at one of our evidence roundtables, one of the key impacts of devolving budgets to communities is that you start to see change in local power negotiation – with communities more confident in what they are able to do.

Growing the possibilities from 'informal' community action

A further key opportunity for building community participation is in linking perceived informal community activities – for example litter picking and knitting groups – into formal community institutions and local decision-making. These community activities and spaces are where people talk to each other, and are invested in being part of the community. Capturing these informal units of organising is essential in ensuring that local decision-making and participation has the broadest possible reach in the community.

Southwark Council – Community Action Networks

We received written evidence from Community Southwark, about Southwark Council's support for community action in the borough. They currently fund Community Southwark to work with local groups to provide infrastructure support for local action, including: volunteering support; brokering local networks around local issues and campaigns; and community development within underrepresented communities. They have created 'Community Action Networks' which provide the space, opportunity and time for local people to come together to participate in informal discussions on issues that concern them locally.

Community Southwark highlight that this "is a significant step in the right direction, and such resources need to be continually evolving to identify and support the very diverse activities that local active citizens undertake (on an entirely voluntary basis); it is the tip of a very large iceberg which will require greater coordinated action with our public sector institutions to ensure that 'the door is open' for greater joint-action with local people."

Our call to action

Our Commission seeks to inject new life into the localism agenda. Action across the four domains of localism identified by our Commission – institutions, powers, relationships and community capacity – is required to harness the power of community and create the environment for localism to thrive.

We need a new power partnership between local government and local people to unlock the potential of localism.

Community leaders can embed localism and participation in the culture of our neighbourhoods by:

- Supporting community development and 'informal' community activity: to re-engage communities who feel powerless and provide the impetus for further community action.
- Removing hierarchies in forums of community decision-making: recognising the role of local leaders to harness community expertise and participation.
- Community organisations have an essential role to play in embedding localism:
  - Using their own participatory governance structures and community accountability mechanisms;
  - Using community organising mechanisms, building the networks and relationships within communities to develop community voice and action;
  - Using community development activities and nuturing community action;
  - Supporting the local economy through hosting and incubating local enterprise, and local economic activity which prioritises the knowledge, experience and involvement of local residents.

Local government and other local public bodies can strengthen community institutions, including parish councils, community organisations and neighbourhood forums, by:

- Embracing perceived 'risk' through devolution of budgets to neighbourhoods
- Adopting community asset transfer (CAT) policies to put local resources and amenities in the hands of local people, galvanise community action, and secure sustainable funding for community institutions.

Local government and other local public bodies can support localism in our public services and economy by:

- Prioritising social value in public procurement; strengthening the local economy by keeping money spent on public services in the local area; using co-production in the design and delivery of public services;
- Embedding community control and involvement within local economic strategies and local plans, supporting neighbourhood planning and community economic development as strategies led by local people.

Ultimately both people and local government should not need to wait for 'permission from above' to get things done in their neighbourhoods.

Many of the community groups and local councils we met through our evidence events had a 'just do it' mentality. The process of navigating barriers and blockages from 'higher powers' can be frustrating. But the spirit of direct collective local action remains powerful: communities must claim it.

We need national government to show leadership in setting the conditions for localism to flourish.

We require legislative change to strengthen the framework of localism:

- Strengthening local powers, including a genuine 'Community Right to Buy' to take ownership of valued local assets and a 'services partnership power' to embed community involvement in local services;
- Strengthening local governance by making it easier to establish parish councils and extending the powers designated to neighbourhood forums in non-parished areas.

Embedding localism within the devolution agenda:

- The devolution agenda currently lacks a coherent neighbourhood dimension. New and existing devolution arrangements should be held to account by whether they enhance neighbourhood control and strengthen the power of community.

APPENDIX: Call for evidence and survey on Community Rights

Our call for evidence and full questions can be viewed here: http://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Where-next-for-Localism-Consultation-document.pdf

As part of our evidence for this Commission, we issued a survey on Community Rights between March and May 2017. This was completed by 151 respondents (44 VCSEs, 10 VCSE support groups, 31 from local government, and 66 individuals).

A copy of the questions are below

1. First name

2. Last name

3. Organisation name (if applicable)

4. Type of organisation

5. Description of organisation

6. Experience of Community Rights

7. In your experience, how successful has the Community Right to Bid been in supporting communities to take on assets of community value? [multipicklist – very successful, successful, moderately successful, moderately unsuccessful, no impact]

8. Can you provide further detail to your answer?

9. In your experience, how successful has the Community Right to Challenge been in supporting communities to take on assets of community value? [multipicklist – very successful, successful, moderately successful, moderately unsuccessful, no impact]

10. Can you provide further detail to your answer?

11. How successful has Neighbourhood Planning and Community Right to Build been in ensuring that development and planning is community-led? [multipicklist – very successful, successful, moderately successful, moderately unsuccessful, no impact]

12. Can you provide further detail to your answer?

13. Do you have recommendations for how the current Community Rights could be strengthened or amended, including what new rights or powers should be available for local communities?

14. Are there any other comments you wish to raise or issues you think would be of interest to the Commission?

Headline findings on the use of the Community Rights
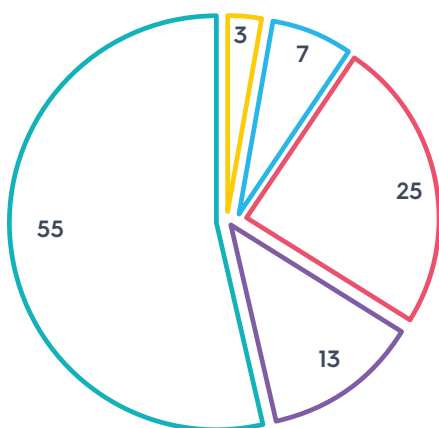
Right to Bid
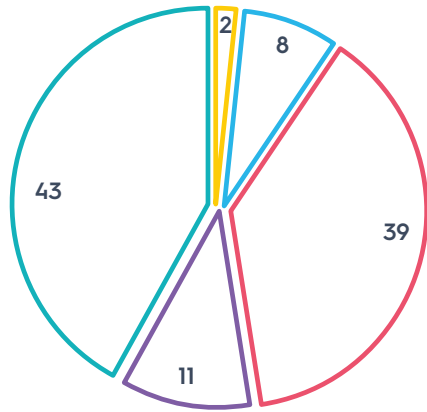
- 🟡 Very successful
- 🔵 Successful
- 🔴 Moderately successful
- 🟣 Moderately unsuccessful
- 🟢 No impact

In your experience, how successful has the Community Right to Bid been in supporting communities to take on assets of community value? [multipicklist – very successful, successful, moderately successful, moderately unsuccessful, no impact]

- **Completed by: 103 respondents.**
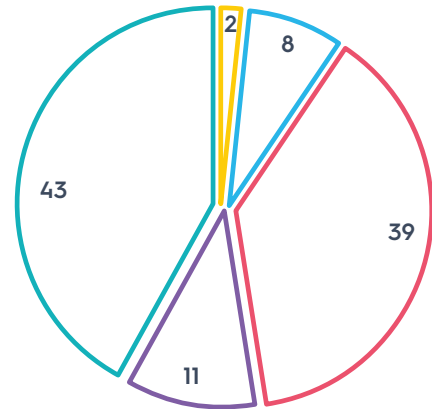
Right to Challenge

- 🟡 Very successful
- 🔵 Successful
- 🔴 Moderately successful
- 🟣 Moderately unsuccessful
- 🟢 No impact

In your experience, how successful has the Community Right to Challenge been in supporting communities to take on assets of community value?

- **Completed by: 103 respondents.**

Neighbourhood Planning and Right to Build

- 🟡 Very successful
- 🔵 Successful
- 🔴 Moderately successful
- 🟣 Moderately unsuccessful
- 🟢 No impact

How successful has Neighbourhood Planning and Community Right to Build been in ensuring that development and planning is community-led? [multipicklist – very successful, successful, moderately successful, moderately unsuccessful, no impact]

- **Completed by 111 respondents.**

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to everyone that provided written evidence, completed our survey, attended our evidence events, and engaged with us throughout this process. Particular thanks go to those who attended our evidence events as expert witnesses, including:

Charlotte Alldritt, Director of Public Services and Communities at the RSA
Dr David Sweeting, Senior Lecturer in Urban Studies at Bristol University
Penny Evans, Assistant Director at Knowle West Media Centre
Cllr. Peter Macfadyen, author of Flatpack Democracy and founder of Independents for Frome
Ed Cox, Director at IPPR North
Dr Jenny Rouse, Associate Director at Centre for Local Economic Strategies
Warren Escadale, CEO at Voluntary Sector North West
Professor Gus John
Steve Conway, Collyhurst Big Local

About Locality

Locality supports local community organisations to unlock the power in their community to build a fairer society. Our network of 550 community organisations transforms lives by giving local people a purpose, a good place to live and good health. Locality supports community organisations with specialist advice, peer-learning, resources, and campaigning to create better operating conditions.

About Power to Change

Power to Change is an independent trust that strengthens community businesses across England. We received our endowment from Big Lottery Fund in 2015.

At a time when many parts of the UK face cuts, neglect and social problems, we are helping local people come together to take control, and make sure their local areas survive and stay vibrant.

No one understands a community better than the people who live there. In some areas, people are already coming together to solve problems for themselves, and we support them as they run businesses which help their whole community and recycles money back into the local area. Community businesses revive local assets, protect the services people rely on, and address local needs.

www.powertochange.org.uk

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