

All Party Parliamentary Group Portcullis House, 11th December 2013
NALC/DCLG Local Democracy

If Localism and Sustainable Communities are to be anything more than Government PR, there must be genuine empowerment of Parish & Town Councils. At our level it is felt that the Government Strategy is to devolve responsibility for local matters, but without giving us the authority or the funding to do anything more than take the blame when things go wrong. And much of the devolved power stops at Borough Council level.

The Government must bite the bullet and trust Parishes to act in the best interests of our communities and the country.

There are two aspects to Localism that have the greatest impact from our perspective:

1. Parishes taking on a greater role in keeping villages looking good:

The tools for much of what you refer to as Localism have already been informally set up between Parish Councils who care for their communities, and Local Authorities who haven't got the finance to fulfil their responsibilities. Such tasks as hedge and grass cutting, salt bins and gritting, village enhancements and footpath maintenance are already being done by pro-active parish councils, putting strain on our steadily reducing resources.

We therefore need a relaxation of the current rules on tendering and contracts at County and Borough.

2. Planning, and in particular housing development.

For years Development Control has meant just that: control of development: And over the years those constraints have been strengthened and added to, with Air Quality, Sustainability, Energy Efficiency and combating Climate Change all taking their rightful place to lessen the impact of development.

But because of the financial incentives available to Planning Authorities, we see developments approved solely on the housing need, trumping all Planning Rules, with no regard to the damage to communities, or harm to the families buying these new homes.

We do not oppose development, but it must be organic, necessary for growth of the local community and a percentage of inward migration, and should be the province of small local builders, and with adequate infrastructure in place before building commences.

The streetscene in any British Village is unique, whether it is a picture postcard rural village, or a small hub town like Borough Green. That individuality is being lost, and we will all regret it.

Because of the Recession, large amounts of commercial space are being released by planners for housing development : we already bitterly regret the huge loss of local employment land, and that loss of employment land will curtail growth as the economy recovers.

Our young people are being forced out of the villages, not because of lack of housing, but because the housing that is built is going to more affluent commuters, or to overspill from the lack of social housing in the urban areas where it is most needed.

Local Authority Planning Committees are governed by party politics, and our elected representatives toe the party line rather than judge applications on planning merit.

Parish Councils are consultees on planning applications, but our contributions are always ignored unless they support the Planning Authorities recommendations

I would urge the below measures to add balance to the planning process:

1. Parish Councils should be given the right to call applications before a Planning Committee. *On planning grounds*
2. A Parish Council representative should have the right to speak *(and vote)* ~~del~~ as part of a planning committee.
3. The Planning Inquiry system should be simplified, requiring the relevant parties to present their own cases to Inspectors, removing the exorbitant costs of Barristers from all but the largest Inquiries.
4. There should be a Planning Ombudsman . At the moment, once an inspector has made a decision, no-one but the Secretary of State or the Courts can over-ride that decision, even if the evidence presented is flawed or the Inspector deliberately misled. Parish Councils must have the right to demand an inquiry or appeal where planning rules have been broken.

These are our villages, our homes, and we have more right to determine our own destinies than the Planning Authorities and Developers.

Mike Taylor
Borough Green Parish Council