

**Localism**

**DLP BRIEFING NOTE 24**

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## Introduction

'Localism' is a word that we are hearing much of from the new Coalition Government. In this Briefing Paper we endeavour to explain what it may mean for the Planning & Development sector and some of the immediate consequences that we are facing.

### Localism – a summary

In November of last year the Conservative Party published its Policy Green Paper No 9 entitled 'Control Shift – Returning Power to Local Communities'. The paper outlined the Conservative's proposed programme of '*... political decentralisation to revitalise democracy and strengthen community life; a five-pillar strategy to shift power away from the central state and firmly back to local people...*'.

A key pillar of this localism strategy is '*Giving local communities a share in local growth*', which, by means of '*... a transparent and de-politicised grant system*' will deliver a major increase in house building '*... in a way that naturally meets local demand and which is aimed at meeting the unmet need for housing...*'. The paper went on to state:-

- The housing challenge can only be met if we acknowledge that local support for new development is the crucial missing element;
- That the solution lies in giving local councils and communities incentives for house building, not targets;
- That by creating a real and substantial financial incentive to reward communities that accept house building, we can guarantee that those directly affected by development are those that benefit.

The paper made a commitment to match fund the additional council tax income raised by each council on each new house built for a period of six years. It would be funded by abolishing Housing & Planning Delivery Grant from 2010/2011 and placing the £250 million saved into a match fund, which they would then increase by £250 million annually over the subsequent four years (to a total of £1,250 million) by reducing the formula grant to local authorities by the same amount over the same period.

Fundamental to the localism strategy is '*returning power over housing and planning matters to local councils*'. In this the paper sets out a clear commitment to:-

- Abolish Regional Planning;
- Revoke all Regional Spatial Strategies;
- Repeal national planning guidance that relates to regional planning;
- Enable LPA to revise in whole or in part their existing LDF to take account of the abolition of RSS.

### The Coalition – Programme for Government

Suffice to say that these proposals have found their way into the Coalition Government's published programme, stating:-

*'The Government believes that it is time for a fundamental shift of power from Westminster to people. We will promote decentralisation and democratic engagement and we will end the era of top-down government by giving new powers to local councils, communities, neighbourhoods and individuals.'*

In particular the Programme for Government notes that:-

- There will be a rapid abolition of RSS and a return of decision making powers on housing and planning to local councils;
- Incentives will be provided to local authorities that provide new sustainable development, including new housing.

These proposals featured in the Queen's Speech on the 25<sup>th</sup> May as elements of the Government's proposed Decentralisation and Localism Bill:-

*'A bill will be introduced to devolve greater powers to councils and local neighbourhoods and give local communities control over housing and planning decisions'.*

### **The Pickles Letter**

Two days following the Queen's Speech the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government the Rt. Hon Eric Pickles wrote to all chief planning officers in England. In a brief two paragraph letter he wrote:-

*'I am writing to you today to highlight our commitment in the coalition agreements where we very clearly set out our intention to rapidly abolish Regional Strategies and return decision making powers on housing and planning to local councils. Consequently, decisions on housing supply (including the provision of travellers' sites) will rest with Local Planning Authorities without the framework of regional numbers and plans.*

*I will make a formal announcement on this matter soon. However, I expect Local planning Authorities and the Planning Inspectorate to have regard to this letter as a material planning consideration in any decisions they are currently taking'.*

However, other than a minimal revision to PPS3 Housing (which we shall address in a separate Briefing Note) to address other manifesto commitments, we have seen and heard little further from the Secretary of State upon planning matters since.

### **The Consequences**

There have been a number of reactions to the Pickles letter, almost wholly on the part of LPA in relation to their emerging LDF. Work has been halted or slowed on the preparation of Core Strategies and other DPD.

In the Bedford area, of particular note has been the impact upon plan preparation in the Milton Keynes and Aylesbury Vale Growth Area. Milton Keynes Council resolved on the 8<sup>th</sup> June to completely reverse its stated position of several years to oppose the proposed development of the South West Milton Keynes Strategic Development Area, a major sustainable urban extension of the City (5,390 new homes) into Aylesbury Vale District. A scheme that MK Council itself had supported throughout the process of preparation of RSS9 the South East Plan; the preparation of the Aylesbury Vale Core Strategy and its own draft submission Core Strategy that was the subject of consultation earlier in the year. Indeed, the Council cannot feasibly now submit its own draft Core Strategy which must be revised significantly to reflect this new stance.

In Aylesbury Vale, where the submission draft Core Strategy is at examination, the Inspector has published an Interim Report upon growth at Aylesbury. In this he has sought the submission of considerable additional work on the Council's part in relation to alternative growth proposals in order to satisfy South East Plan housing requirements at Aylesbury (9,250 new dwellings). Perhaps unsurprisingly in this instance the Council has declined to commit the considerable resources necessary to undertake this work until there is further clarity on the Government's proposed reforms.

In short, in this major growth area, despite massive public and private sector investment over five years or more, plan making to deliver much needed new housing and employment has stalled for the foreseeable future.

In contrast, we have seen Stevenage Borough Council, having submitted its draft Core Strategy to the Secretary of State; write to all participants stating that it remains committed to the growth and regeneration agenda that is set out in the adopted East of England Plan. Unfortunately, however, an important element of the growth strategy at Stevenage is based upon co-operative working with North Hertfordshire District Council, which has formally resolved to '*... cease until there is greater clarity on future numbers of new houses and jobs*'.

The only practical advice that has emerged since the Pickles letter has been provided by the Planning Inspectorate. This advice to Inspectors may be found at:

[http://www.planning-inspectorate.gov.uk/pins/advice\\_for\\_insp/rs\\_forthcoming\\_abolition.pdf](http://www.planning-inspectorate.gov.uk/pins/advice_for_insp/rs_forthcoming_abolition.pdf)

PINS clearly states that until adopted RSS are formally revoked, they remain a part of the development plan and continue to carry the statutory force implied by that. Unfortunately, however, we are also now seeing appeals adjourned at the behest of local planning authorities, where matters of housing land supply based on adopted RSS figures are at issue.

### **Less Haste, More Speed**

Whether knowingly or not, the Secretary of State's letter has simply served to put a significant brake to the planning process, which will not serve the Government's own stated intent to deliver a '*major increase in housing*' over and above that set in train by the former administration. Clarity is required as a matter of urgency, but the Govt. must take the time that is necessary to ensure that their proposed revision of the system is properly thought through, workable and the implications understood; unlike Mr. Pickles' letter.

### **Addressing the Uncertainty**

Despite the considerable uncertainty engendered by the Secretary of State's letter, there are a number of ways in which DLP can assist clients in advancing their proposals, whether a site is being pursued by way of a planning application or through the development plan process. This may include:-

- The review and critical assessment of housing land supply / housing trajectory by reference to levels of housing provision that LPA have themselves found acceptable, whether by way of RSS submissions or through the preparation of their own LDF.
- Prepare statements of case based upon demonstrable levels of housing need derived from LPA Strategic Housing Market Assessments. These are prepared by LPA in accordance with Govt. guidance to inform the LDF evidence base and generally underpin a LPA's own view of general housing need.

- Commission projected household growth figures (TEMPRO and Chelmer projections) to justify overall levels of provision on a district basis and its appropriate (sustainable) distribution.



*'That's another fine mess you've got me into....'*

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