



## LIBERAL DEMOCRAT COMMENT POWER LINES LAID FOR LOCALISM – NOW WE JUST NEED THE JUICE



The rhetoric has been consistent: get Whitehall out of the Town Hall, push power out and down. The reality of year one is more mixed.

The Localism Bill will help cascade power out from Westminster to councils and communities across the country. Local areas will be able to go their own way. Some will see a postcode lottery – others a postcode choice. It's a clear difference from the top-down approach that characterised the New Labour years.

But the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) has still been hovering over the shoulder of council leaders, nudging them (hard in the ribs) from time to time. Yes, it's difficult to let go – perhaps it is even harder to pass up the chance of a good headline. The culture inside CLG needs to start to live up to the words outside.

Decentralisation isn't just a longer word for cuts. Despite the hard times in local government now, when the economy improves the coalition will have fundamentally changed the relationships between citizen and council, council and government and government and citizen.

Oddly (at least I've always thought so) housing policy sits within CLG. Its position there creates this notion that the current housing crisis that we face is more a matter for local authorities than central government. Generously, housing policy might be described as 'improving, but from a low base'. More by luck than design, the coalition will deliver more social homes than Labour's incompetent efforts managed – but still woefully short of facing up to the level of need.

CLG has faced some growing pains over the last year. Much like the curate's egg, the record is good in part. The secretary of state knows the direction of travel; it's just sometimes we seem to be strolling, not sprinting. 🏡

**Steve Gilbert** is Lib Dem MP for St Austell and Newquay and a member of the communities and local government committee

## LABOUR COMMENT A DAMP SQUIB FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY



It was supposed to be about helping councils empower local people – a fundamental shift of power and wealth to working people, no less. But for all David Cameron's gushing rhetoric on localism, his triangulating overtures to Tony Benn on the subject and his promise to create "communities with oomph", the prime minister's version of localism has proved to be nothing short of a huge con.

Let's leave aside the fact that far from trusting councils to deliver services, Eric Pickles is doing the opposite – issuing a constant flurry of diktats on everything from when councils should empty bins to stopping councils printing newspapers and curbing empty-home seizure powers. For the sake of brevity we'll also pass over the fact that the coalition's definition of localism is totally muddled. In virtually every government department it has a different meaning, if it has any meaning at all. This inconsistent approach pales into insignificance when set against the enormous cuts passed down to councils, leaving local government demoralised and drained of resources. Instead of creating "communities with oomph", David Cameron has kicked the stuffing out of them.

In my constituency, through the Rochdale Pioneers, we have a proud history of self-help and building communities. But to see homeless services and the work of voluntary groups who support people back into work under attack is incredibly depressing. So too is the fact that thousands of community groups and charities are closing all over the country. Building social capital is hard. But last year there was genuine excitement, as voluntary-led projects in my community created valuable jobs through the Future Jobs Fund. This year everything has been axed, and despite government promises, the support is just not there. This government is guilty of many, many mistakes. But top of the coalition's charge sheet for me is that they are setting people up to fail. That's the worse crime of all. 🏡

**Simon Danczuk** is Labour MP for Rochdale and a member of the communities and local government committee

**EXPERT VIEW**  
**LEGISLATIVE BOLDNESS**  
**IS ONLY HALF THE STORY**



This is certainly a government keen to get on with things but, as befits a prime minister who made localism a key plank of his election platform, activity at CLG has been particularly pronounced.

The department is currently steering through Parliament the Localism Bill – a behemoth of legislation with more than 450 pages of provisions covering areas of policy as diverse as neighbourhood planning, local referendums, social housing tenure and finance, mayoral development corporations and even, in the form of the General Power of Competence, the statutory underpinning of local government itself. Though I would argue that ministers could afford to be bolder still with some of the policies in the bill, it is anything but timid.

But the bill is far from the whole story. The department's Local Government Resource Review will, I expect, advocate the local retention of business rates, hopefully along the lines of the model advocated in Localis's recent report, *The Rate Escape*. This would be a major step forward for localism, and at long last give councils a real incentive to help drive forward the national economy.

Despite progress in these and many other areas, it has certainly not been plain sailing for Eric Pickles and his ministerial team. As ever, cutting budgets has led to no shortage of criticism – although most in local government knew that cuts were coming regardless of who held the reins in Whitehall.

For all the positives, one area of particular disappointment has been community budget pilots, which have the potential to achieve the rare double whammy of providing better, more joined-up public services at less cost to the Exchequer. However, I fear that the many vested interests for whom a more co-ordinated state sector represents a personal threat are all too easily winning the day, so far. A substantial injection of political will is needed soon, lest an excellent idea withers and dies. 🏠

**Alex Thomson** is chief executive of the Localis think-tank



**Best foot forward:** but communities secretary Eric Pickles faces opposition from vested interests in local government, says Alex Thomson



**New homes being built near Ashford, Kent:** a 'New Homes Bonus' aims to incentivise local authorities to build more homes

## POLICY SUMMARY

- ➊ Moving power from Whitehall to the town hall, the Localism Bill will give local authorities the power to intervene in all unreserved areas. Proposals also include elected mayors for some of the biggest English cities; and ending the ring-fencing of local government funds with the exception of schools and public health.
- ➋ Greater transparency for local authorities, including giving

councils greater power to manage themselves; publishing information on spending and salaries; and allowing community groups to challenge local authorities to provide services.

- ➌ Regional planning strategies scrapped with responsibilities returned to local councils, and a 'New Homes Bonus' introduced.
- ➍ Local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) replace the old RDAs.