



# People Power

Findings from the Commission  
on the Future of Localism:  
Summary Report



power to  
change

NATIONAL  
LOTTERY FUNDED

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East Cleveland Big Local April 2016 Klondike bike race

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# 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 – this report.
2. The full body of evidence is available online at [www.locality.org.uk](http://www.locality.org.uk)

# Foreword



**Lord Bob Kerlake**

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.



**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.

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.

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.<sup>1</sup> Educational opportunity tied to parental income, pushing up house prices in neighbourhoods with good schools.<sup>2</sup> Withdrawal of finance from disadvantaged communities, with our big banks secure in the City deemed 'too big to fail'.<sup>3</sup> An electoral system that only feels like it counts if you live in a marginal seat<sup>4</sup>, with political alienation most prevalent among the young and the poor<sup>5</sup>.

## **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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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/>

<sup>2</sup> 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/>

<sup>3</sup> 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>

<sup>4</sup> 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>

<sup>5</sup> 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/>

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<sup>6</sup> 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/>

<sup>7</sup> Locality. (2017). 'Powerful Communities, Strong Economies.' Locality. Available at: <http://locality.org.uk/resources/powerful-communities-strong-economies-report/>

<sup>8</sup> 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.

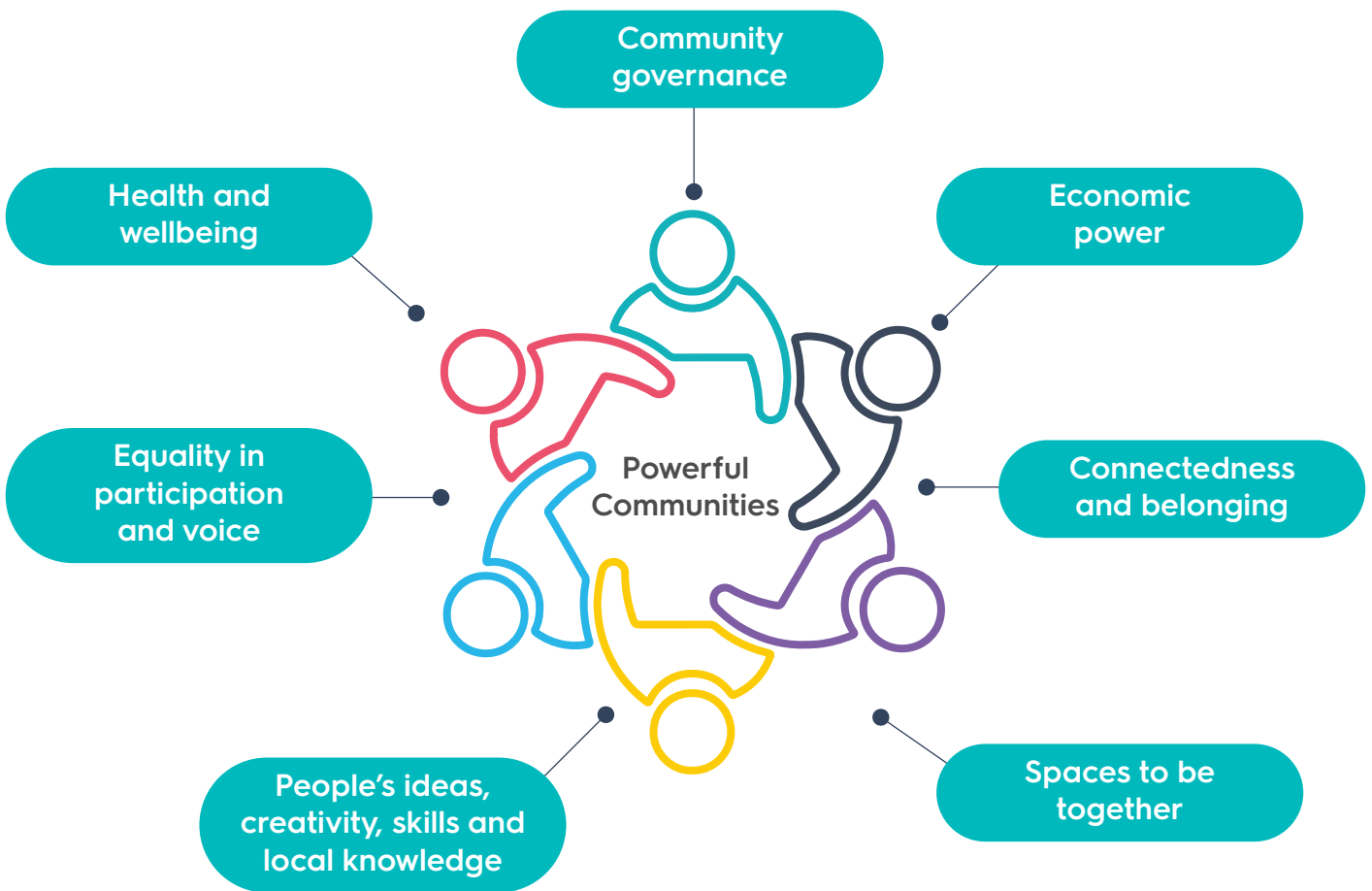


Fig 1. What are the sources of community power?

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.”<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>, if we are truly to realise the Government’s ambition to ‘create an economy that works for everyone.’<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> 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>

<sup>12</sup> 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>

<sup>13</sup> May, T. (2016). ‘Theresa May’s conference speech: We can make Britain a country that works for everyone.’ CCHQ Press. Available at: <http://press.conservatives.com/post/147947450370/we-can-make-britain-a-country-that-works-for>

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<sup>9</sup> 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](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/78977/coalition_programme_for_government.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> 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/>

## 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.

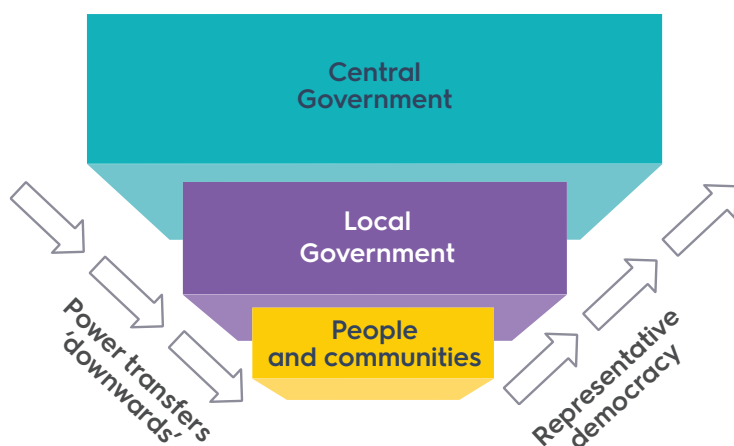


Fig.2. Current expectations of power and democracy

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.

<sup>14</sup> Locality. (2017). 'Powerful Communities, Strong Economies.' Locality. Available at: <http://locality.org.uk/resources/powerful-communities-strong-economies-report/>

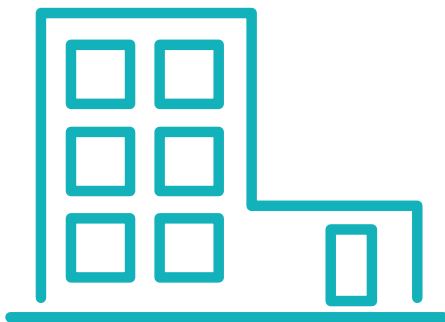
<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

<sup>16</sup> See for example New Economics Foundation. (2013). 'Co-production in mental health: a review.' Nef. Available at: [http://b3cdn.net/nefoundation/ca0975b7cd88125c3e\\_ywm6bp31l.pdf](http://b3cdn.net/nefoundation/ca0975b7cd88125c3e_ywm6bp31l.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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

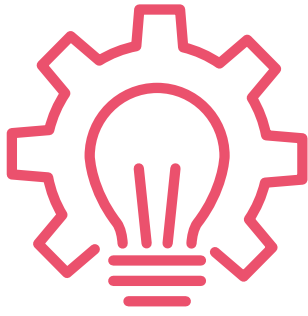
One of the most valuable outcomes of community action is the feeling of collective power, as well as personal agency, that comes with the proof of what can be achieved in partnership with neighbours for a shared purpose.<sup>19</sup> Connectedness and belonging within a community is often associated with 'social capital,' broadly defined by levels of social trust, participation and association, cohesion and collective efficacy.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> 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/>

<sup>18</sup> 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/>

<sup>19</sup> Clegg, S, Courpasson, D. and Phillips, N. (2006). 'Power and Organisations.' London: Sage.

<sup>20</sup> 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>



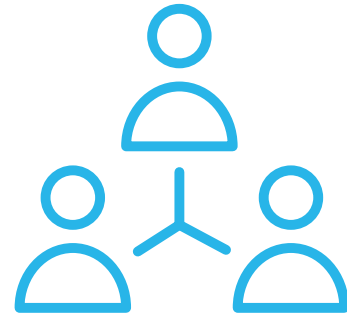
### **People's ideas, creativity, skills and local knowledge:**

Community is actively created through social relationships between people.<sup>21</sup> 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.



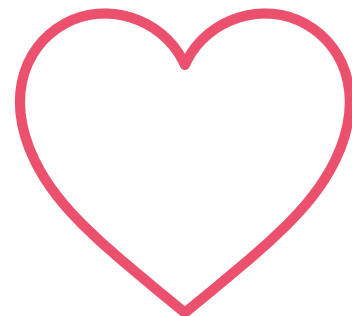
### **Community governance has meaningful influence:**

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.

<sup>21</sup> 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 of 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

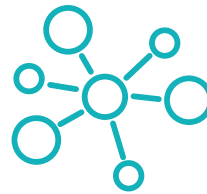
We require action across all four domains of localism: institutions; powers; relationships; and community capacity.

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<sup>22</sup>. Change is required in relationships, resources, policies, power structures and values.

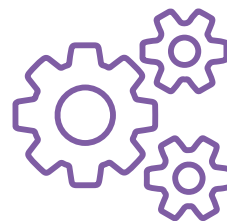
Like all complex systems, the change that's required cannot be achieved through policy and legislative levers alone. We have heard how the connections between the 'formal' institutions and powers of localism and the 'informal' ingredients of supportive relationships and community involvement must be 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.

<sup>22</sup> 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

“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

“ 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

“ 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



“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<sup>23</sup>, 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.’

<sup>23</sup> 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 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 nurturing 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.

# 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; 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](http://mycommunity.org.uk)

## Acknowledgements

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**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

# locality

the power of community

## 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.

## Believe in the power of community

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## 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](http://www.powertochange.org.uk)



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