



## Meeting on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2011

### Localism Bill

#### Introductory Remarks (Tony Pexton)

The current situation was outlined whereby Government is committed to decentralisation - and public services will experience constrained budgets in order to address the financial deficit. The YHRAF has received a letter from Defra that provides some indication of Government thinking on the future of a RAF-type body; Defra recognises the value of local knowledge and expertise but Government does want to reduce the plethora of different bodies. In addition, the recent OCED report on rural delivery highlights the important role of Defra and suggests that a review of RAFs could enhance performance. Whilst these things endorse the work of the YHRAF, current funding will only cover costs until the end of December 2011 and therefore it is important at this time to consider its future role? The question was posed - is there a role for YHRAF in the LEP scenario?

Context: regional structures disappearing, underlying mainstreaming of rural policy, constrained budgets - all present risks for rural communities and businesses.

However, Defra appears to recognise value of having a network of rural contacts / local expertise operating at the sub-national level. Framework for RAF-type successor to be produced (in due course).

OECD Report identified a particular characteristic of English rural context - high levels of connectivity between rural & urban. Noted value of SMEs and local partnerships. Rural interventions are more likely to produce indirect benefits for urban sustainability.

#### ***Localism for Dummies (Andrew Thurston) - some observations***

The Decentralisation and Localism Bill is currently at the committee stage in Parliament. The Bill is a spirational and will require 142 different local authority powers to be amended via a substantial amount of secondary legislation in order for it to be delivered. The Bill has been broadly welcomed by the Local Government Association as a window of opportunity; however local authority business models will have to adapt substantially to embrace it. It is not known what knowledge base or a skill exists within either local authorities or the community to take up these opportunities.

#### *Questions from the audience:*

Q: Can you give some indication about the background to the legislation?

A: Philosophy is part of Eric Pickles vision - combined with the way in which the current Coalition Government has arisen.

Q: How much of the community infrastructure levy will be available?

A: Unknown at this stage but understand that only a proportion will be available.

Q: How will the planning issues be implemented in National Parks?

A: Nothing in the Bill recognises the National Park responsibility to protect the local landscape. This is one of the areas that requires further clarification by Government

*Other points made during the discussion included:*

Elected Mayors are not an issue for rural areas at the moment.

Some mixed messages within the proposals for example localism suggests power shift to the locality but the removal or merger of quangos shifts power back centrally.

Some thinking about regionalism is beginning to resurface in relation to groups of LEPs.

Is there a genuine window of opportunity to make a difference (LEP experience)? Power of competence (not just what Local Government does but what we ask from local authorities).

Definitions are a problem - what is meant by community?

Financial Times article (28<sup>th</sup> Jan) cited - increased risks of Nimbyism.

Localism signals major adaptation of local authority business model - will this happen? Key role of Councillors.

Some 142 powers will need to change to enable localism to happen - major rafts of secondary legislation to follow. Along the way easy to imagine high levels of policy conflicts - e.g. National Park Authorities have other statutory pressures. How will distinctively rural issues overlap with LEPs?

### **Community-Led Planning (Dave Melling) - Worth Valley case study**

A presentation on the development of community-led plans in the Bradford area including the details of a research programme and a case study on the Worth Valley.

Identified that Bradford Council comprises 60% rural hinterland. Problem of perceptions. Previously identified problems around Parish Planning:

Written - then shelved (lack of wider context) / how to deliver? / How does Local Government mesh wider strategies with parish level?

Case study area - Worth Valley (part of much larger research). Identified the problems in more detail (methodology - infiltrated existing networks meetings):

The results of the research so far indicate that:

- (i) Strategic policy context constantly changing (often incomprehensible at local level) - local plans quickly become out of date with the strategic fit.
- (ii) Low awareness of community-led planning.
- (iii) Individual involved in writing plans moves on to other interests and without that key leadership role little implementation of action plans occurs.
- (iv) Local Authorities find it difficult to engage with so many plans and this may be exacerbated by the cuts.
- (v) Partnerships and alliances difficult to keep motivated at times of constant change.

A number of solutions are beginning to emerge from the research - full details of which will be shared at some workshops in late March and early April.

- (i) Realistic measures and actions can be included in plans where co-operation between the Local Authority and Community-led Plan occurs during its development - local plans need realism - e.g. measures that can be delivered at local level by local resources.
- (ii) It is important not to write plans that rely on others to deliver actions.
- (iii) Community wants a stronger voice in the development of economic work.
- (iv) Community want a better understanding of strategies.
- (v) Bring rural together with planners.

### **Hudswell Community Pub (Martin Booth)**

A presentation about the development of the Hudswell Community Pub Limited. Although profitable the local public house in Hudswell had closed due to the changes in property values that had occurred and was failing to attract a new buyer. The community had come together to look at the possibility of purchasing the pub and invested in community shares. Alongside this some grants had been provided to cover refurbishment costs. The community decided at an early stage that they would appoint tenants to run the public house with the community being involved in other aspects of the development. Recently they had opened a shop run by volunteers, the land next to the pub is let as allotments, a book containing a series of local walks has been published and the group is looking at the possibility of developing some accommodation units to the rear.

Local socialism or localism? Not always a public service gap - responding to market failure. One member one vote coop (an IPS for community benefit).

Surpluses re-invested to benefit the community. Opportunities to develop other initiatives e.g. housing, village green etc.

### **Discussion Groups**

Looked at Neighbourhood Planning / Right to Build and Right to Buy / Right to Challenge.

See separate notes.

### **Plenary**

The workshop groups reported findings to the meeting:

#### *Neighbourhood Planning / Right to Build*

The following points were made -

- (i) Cost - the estimate for a plan is between £20,000 - £100,000 or 5 more per neighbourhood area. Participants felt that this is duplication of effort and will result in disharmony between communities and Local Authorities. They query the relationship to the current Local Development Framework and the difference between adjacent planning areas.
- (ii) Insufficient detail on some issues is currently available in order to make informed comments.

- (iii) The group is sceptical about who will want to get involved. It appears to be an additional task / burden on individuals volunteering to be on Parish Councils and maybe a disincentive.

*Right to Challenge / Right to Buy*

The following points were made -

- (i) More of a challenge than an opportunity.
- (ii) Lack of clarity resulting from things yet to be decided. Local Authority to make register of assets but how? Similarly, with the challenge criteria yet to be decided by the Secretary of State.
- (iii) Resources - where will the funding to do these things come from? Could communities replicate the Hudswell example? Do they have the knowledge and acumen?
- (iv) Confidence - does the community believe in this way forward? Will it be seen as an asset or a liability? Will Local Authorities off-load buildings and services?
- (v) Expertise - where it exists this is a key opportunity.

**Closing Remarks (Tony Pexton)**

There are more questions than answers - but hopefully people are now better informed.

Session has identified, more than ever, need for rural representation.

What mechanisms exist for doing something with results from this session?

Re-focus strategy around LEPs - but also keep focussed on the national agenda - noting that Ministers have written to the RAF outlining future thinking about possible sub-national roles. It maybe that only one rural body will be needed resulting in a possible merger with the Regional Food & Farming Forum

The Chairman asked for the endorsement of the audience to write to Ministers drawing-on the issues raised. This was agreed.

DF / KW yhraf

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