

Submission to ‘Localism’ Inquiry by North Dorset District Council and the Community Partnership Executive of North Dorset

The submitter of evidence

North Dorset is a rural area with a population of 64,000 dispersed over a large geographical area including four market towns and many villages. There is an acute shortage of affordable housing, poor access to services, below average incomes, poor transport links and an economy based on agriculture and micro businesses. North Dorset District Council has one of the lowest district council tax rates in the country at £105 per annum for a Band D property. The Council's make up is 17 Conservative, 13 Liberal Democrat and 3 Independent Members. Localism has been delivered over the last four years by cross party co-operation.

The localism approach is based on the core principle that people who live locally know best what is needed to build sustainability. Community partnerships and partners are given the money, trust and autonomy to commission projects and influence policy. They are engaged as partners in the process. The Community Partnership Executive for North Dorset is a ‘partnership of partnerships’, an executive group led by the community. It co-ordinates community partnership activity across the district with the input of the Association of Town and Parish Councils and the third sector partner, Dorset Community Action.

Localism is transforming the face of North Dorset. Our community partnerships and parish councils representing their market towns and surrounding areas come together to decide what services are important and take responsibility for safeguarding those services whilst improving the quality of the service and reducing the cost to the tax payer. This has been independently evaluated as the best and most coherent community planning model looking at local community, district and county level, helping the area to buck the trend of rural decline and maintain a resilient economy.

Executive Summary

- The District Council and Partnerships have a four year experience of decentralising services and enabling neighbourhoods to determine their own future. Over 12 incorporated companies or social enterprises have been set up, designed and run by local volunteers to deliver services and projects, using a variety of governance models suited to each venture.
- It has gone beyond place based budgeting to grant aiding capital to community organisations to commission and build major facilities themselves. Over 190 projects have been delivered successfully.
- District and Parish Councils have found new ways of working together with services delegated as close to the frontline as possible. Begun as a cost cutting exercise, it soon became clear that this way of working delivers high quality services and high calibre social involvement and interaction. It has proved to be far more than simply achieving efficiency savings.
- The Council seeks to build capacity in the community through the partnerships and they in turn build capacity in the Council, for example, they have attracted resources and commissioned town design statements of sufficient quality to adopt a supplementary planning document to shape the future of towns and villages.

Lessons Learned

- It takes time and commitment to set up, to win hearts and minds and to build two-way trust.
- It takes investment in the third sector to provide community development, expertise, to build project management skills and to train volunteers in business planning skills and governance.
- It takes commitment and hard work from local councillors and a willingness to spend time listening, providing information and planning together.
- It is useful to have the local knowledge and local connections of a district council and if one does not exist, that local connection must be built.
- People will volunteer if investment is made in the service to be transferred, i.e., they are not interested in run down buildings and neglected services.
- It will need continual nurturing to make links with new volunteers and sustain those already working hard in the community.
- Large community theatres and facilities can be self sustaining without subsidy if the volunteers and community are involved from the outset in establishing the vision.
- Even small projects such as new play areas, if given to the community to drive, can bring new people into the democratic process, for example, people in a local housing estate have now stood for election at the Town Council.

Recommendations for Action

- North Dorset Scrutiny Committees have done effective inquiries into access to health services but find it difficult to influence decision making in acute services and the PCT, although the resulting contacts with GP surgeries and dentists have been beneficial to a wider contribution to the neighbourhood. The local Scrutiny role could be established.
- Current VAT regulations on capital expenditure and charity legislation create barriers for community based trusts and usefully could be reviewed, e.g. introducing the planned secondary legislation to enable charitable incorporated organisations.
- 'Competing' initiatives from Government Departments confuse what happens in neighbourhoods: e.g. Police PACT panels were set up in a prescribed way which cut across other community forums.
- JobCentre Plus operates at too great a distance from benefits authorities and the advice voluntary sector such as the CAB. Its services could be decentralised to benefits authorities and regulated by DWP.
- A great deal of time and resource is given by local authorities and the voluntary sector to advising people about what Benefits are available and where/how to access them. The high volume of different Benefits and different criteria are confusing and create a barrier. They are also inequitable: two people living side by side may qualify for a different level of Housing Benefit because of the date they became eligible, even if their outgoings and situation is exactly the same. If less resource was given to managing the complexity, more resource could be given locally to return to work initiatives.