

Localism - Historic Buildings: Local Action Conference Report

The movement towards localism, combined with public spending cuts and the Government's vision for the 'Big Society', represents the most radical potential shake-up of the planning system for many years.

The concern in the heritage sector has been: how will this affect the historic environment? Consequently the focus has been to counter perceived threats to historic buildings by allowing local planning procedures to override national cultural policies.

This year's North West Branch Day conference looked beyond the current conflicts and sought to explore the ways in which local initiatives might unlock the potential for the historic environment to play a greater role in shaping the future of towns and villages. It was held at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester, in September, and chaired by Mike Brown, the IHBC Policy Secretary.

The early part of the morning was devoted to: Setting the Scene: Localism in the Historic Environment. The first speaker was Chris Smith OBE, the National Planning Director at EH. His theme was: Empowering Local Communities. Smith made the point that although 'local' was considered new conservation areas had always been about local communities. The support from local people was vital, because conservation was not just about buildings. He also gave the example of Syracuse, Sicily, where members of the local community always outnumber tourists in the evening passeggiata.

He talked about the wider context. Although there was not time to discuss the detail of the Localism Bill, he felt that that EH, IHBC and others had lobbied with some success, to mitigate against the main threats to the historic environment.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was another exciting live issue. The main problem Smith identified was in the presumption in favour of sustainable development the Brundtland definition was being undermined: social and environmental elements were considered but were overshadowed by the economic dimensions. Since sustainable development was often likened to a three legged stool with each strand forming one of the legs, making one leg (economics) proportionately so much bigger would unbalance the stool as a whole. In local terms this would impact on the critical need for a completed set of Local Development Frameworks (LDFs).

The future held so many unknowns, Smith said, not least the regulatory responsibilities the Secretary of State would be granted. Another unknown was the definition that would be used for an asset of community value and in practice: what will the community be able to buy? In addition the procedure to be followed by authorities when making Neighbourhood Development Orders still needed to be clarified. On a positive note, Smith suggested that it was perhaps best to see these unknowns as opportunities. EH has had to acknowledge that good Neighbourhood Plans may deliver great historic environment management.

As a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review, EH would lose £51m from its budget by Year 4, i.e., 33%. Across EH as a whole, in excess of 200 jobs would go. There were new targets for the National Collections Group (NCG), which would mean 'leaner structures'. The NCG responsibilities include EH's 420 sites and monuments with their collections and archives and the National Monuments Record. EH's grant budget would be much reduced, although currently it is still £1m. For now the local (regional) offices would remain. All of this would have a radical impact on EH.

Smith qualified this by explaining that the Government had no clear guarantees about the economy. The impact of CSR cuts on EH would obviously impact on the heritage sector, but EH would fight hard to still provide the support for local services: liaising with Local Authorities and supporting community groups.

Local Government were still seen as being core to the system though this sector too was under pressure. In the localism climate EH would have to work out whether and how it could respond to individual communities.

There are obviously philosophical issues about how we define a community. This leads us to ask whether we mean: those who live in the area, those who work in the area, those who visit the area and/or those who share a common interest? In fact the question is: who has the right to a say when change is proposed? Time constraints meant this aspect could not be elaborated.

Smith ended by asking: what is localism? Localism means giving communities more responsibility, he said, and the Big Society was about encouraging communities to take that responsibility

Despite the unknowns, Smith concluded that England's heritage will be more clearly the responsibility of local communities. Although, EH will continue to support and advise although this would be within the ambit of its national responsibilities, it would be the Day Conference speakers, delegates and bodies represented, who would (have to) take the up the challenge.

The second speaker was Dave Chetwyn from DJC1 Planning and a former Chair of the IHBC. His talk looked at the question: What is Localism and What Does it Mean for Heritage?

Chetwyn began by discussing what localism was. Localism stemmed from a (Government) perception of planning in the recession, in which planners were seen as 'enemies of enterprise', he believed, hence the need for reform: in terms of Economic Development and Regeneration and Planning/Local Government. He echoed Smith in highlighting the presumption in favour of sustainable development in the NPPF and asked whether the Government knew that social and environmental and economic aspects were linked rather than polarised. He pointed out that the economy was referred to far more often in the Localism Bill than social and environmental issues.

Local plans are intended to meet development needs and respond to rapid changes with flexibility. This is underlined by tensions between economic considerations and

growth on the one hand and social/environmental issues and local empowerment on the other. There have been viability issues before, but Chetwyn doubted that this would be improved by the abolition of Regional Development Agencies and the introduction of Local Enterprise Partnerships.

Chetwyn tried to give a flavour of aspects of Neighbourhood Planning, such as: Neighbourhood Development Plans, Local Development Orders, Community Rights to Buy and Neighbourhood Forums. He explained that local plans might include anything that other development plan documents deal with, but that anything dealt with by different regimes, such as major infrastructure, were beyond their scope.

Neighbourhood Forums would need a minimum of 21 people (following amendments to the Localism Bill), have a 5 year shelf life and the membership would need to reflect the inclusivity, diversity and character of the area/ community.

Policy will be evidence based. The evidence base will be economic, social/community, infrastructure and environmental issues. New and existing evidence will be used to identify key issues. This will inform the formulation of clear aims to address these issues and the aims will lead to policy and proposals.

The localism debate touches on wide ranging issues. Chetwyn discussed issues like proportionate approach and talked about the difference between selective approaches and comprehensive ones: village design statements might evolve into local plans, but inner city areas were more complicated.

The success of localism will depend on support, skills and capacity: to facilitate community and stakeholder engagement and to inform research and analysis. This sort of work will be not the domain of amateurs, although it might perhaps be within the remit of some fairly switched-on civic societies. Chetwyn raised a question with respect to the future availability of essential skills that are currently associated with town planning and place-making practitioners. If these were not available in the public sector would community groups be prepared to do the work of the local authority and engage experts to advise them?

Local plans also raised questions of compliance with: European Directives/legislation, National Legislation (Planning & Other) and National Planning Policy and Local Plan Core strategy.

There were a range of advantages and pitfalls that could be highlighted. One issue Chetwyn focussed on was the 'democratic deficit'. The turnout for Local Elections tended to be lower than for General Elections at 37% compared to 65% (according to figures Chetwyn cited), which raised concerns for the voting on: Neighbourhood Plans, Local Development Orders and/or Community Right to Build development proposals. Although more than 50% of those who voted would need to be in favour before such proposals were approved, with an expected low electorate turnout there was potential for disempowering the majority in the community.

For genuine community engagement to take place, Chetwyn pointed out that consultation had to come first. He talked about the difference between engagement and marketing or promoting one set of ideas and the difference between participation

and tokenism. The latter point referred to Arnstein's Ladder, a theoretical model that illustrated and measured degrees of participation: ranging from degrees of citizen power, through degrees of tokenism, down to non-participation.

Community engagement will need specialist support; events need to be relevant, stimulating and fun; proposals need to be realistic; community engagement needs to be targeted and accessible. All of this raises the question of resources: who will provide or pay for community engagement and neighborhood planning? Will it be some private business benefactor?

Chetwyn left the delegates with a final thought that localism was about process rather than place.

The third speaker was Hugh Rolo, Director of Innovation for Locality, a not for profit organisation which was formed through the merger of bassac and the Development Trusts Association - two leading networks of community owned and led organizations. The topic of his talk was Asset Transfer of Historic Buildings in the UK 2011. Rolo, a former investment banker, told delegates that the current financial situation was a symptom of a dysfunctional system. Financial instruments were limited in their effect and narrow individual approaches: an overall reliance on economic elements did not equate to sustainable development, for example.

Rolo cited the Manningham area in Bradford, where the Pakistani community staged passeggiatas during summer evenings. Manningham was an example of how people continue to reinvent places in which they want to live. Finding a sustainable use for a place was not just about buildings.

Rolo gave a brief history of asset transfer policy in Britain, starting with the 2000 Local Government Act: the Power of Wellbeing. He pointed out that many assets were originally community ones that had been 'adopted' by the local authority in any case.

Rolo mentioned The Quirk Review (2007): Making Assets Work. He stressed the 'we can do it' message that was especially resonant in the 2008 boom and explained that the review recommended recipes rather than blueprints for advancing assets for communities. In Rolo's view the Localism Bill was based on similar principles to the Quirk Report.

He also explained that in 2007 resources had been targeted at so called 'meanwhile use(s)', to address pop-ups, empty shops and town centre resilience issues. Rolo flagged up the 2010 EH guide; Pillars of the Community

The brief history culminating in 2010 when new powers were introduced to help communities save local facilities and services threatened with closure, and give communities the right to bid to take over local state-run services.

Rolo explained the role of the Asset Transfer Unit and explained that this was now run by the Development Trust Association, so it was part of Locality. Rolo gave some brief examples of asset transfer projects including: Hastings Pier, Hartlebury Castle, Battersea Arts Centre and Hornsey Town Hall. The problem at the moment

was that there was too much emphasis on debt reduction. Rolo believed that there was a need to focus more on equity and invest money from pension schemes in schemes like these.

As a final local example, Rolo pointed to Manchester City Football Club. They had raised £1m through community shares, towards the £4m cost of their stadium. The key point, Rolo said, was to mobilize community support.

The remaining half of the morning was set aside to consider: Local Management of Historic Assets. Tony Burton, Director of the Civic Voice, introduced this session with a presentation entitled: Localism - Heritage Threat or Opportunity.

The Civic Voice was launched in April 2010 and over 290 groups were affiliated to it. Civic societies were rooted in pride in their place. They constituted the most numerous participants in the planning process. Civic Societies engage in a range of activities that could be categorised under the following headings: protectionist, which was linked to pride of place; celebratory, which was about local success stories; and practical, which included tree planting and saving buildings etc.

People in Civic Societies have an emotional link to their place and as far as people are concerned the most significant thing that makes a place distinctive is its history. Burton said 78% of people identify historic buildings as something they valued that was at risk. What they wanted to see was: "Well cared for historic buildings."

Burton cited some of the current fears and concerns which he identified as: political rhetoric that seemed to be all "pro-growth"; the proposed planning reforms and their likely impact; and the scale of what he called the "fire sale" of public assets. The consultation, in his view, amounted to people being asked what they thought about the changes that were already being bulldozed through. He asked the philosophical question: who is right when it comes to places – the community or the council? There were fundamental questions that needed resolving about the role of the expert in the Big Society. Burton described the future with all the changes as being 'scary': it was not a simple matter of going from A to B.

Localism was a Government response. It constitutes a "power shift" in which the community became the client. The proposals included communities' rights: rights to buy, bid and run community assets. They will be involved in pre-application consultation and part of neighbourhood planning.

The radical overhaul of planning policy and the adoption of the NPPF was based on a "pro-growth" presumption in which the default answer was "yes". In moving from PPS5 to the NPPF there would be not only a weakening of heritage protection but there would be impacts on town centres and the Brownfield agenda. In fact there was a risk to everyday England in general, Burton feared.

If the changes were going to lead from legislation to social action there were a number of issues to address. First there was the issue of trust: would there really be a "power shift" or would it simply be about "pro-growth" rhetoric? If communities were to play a real role there the question of support needed resolving: how would community activity be funded? In terms culture, would there be access to the skills

and capabilities of councillors and professionals? Communication would be important too: would it be meaningful or would it just be PowerPoint and process? The question of community skills, resources and funding had been raised earlier by Chetwyn.

Burton believed that professionals needed to tap into emotions and 'move from duty into desire'. In answer to the question of how to do this he explained that it was an attitude of mind not a methodology.

He recommended that we embrace localism, in order to bring it to life, and be confident that people do care. In the new environment things would be different and there was a risk of being like a 'canary in a cage'. We needed to work for sustainable solutions and it will be worth it, he assured the delegates.

He finished with a quote from Margaret Mead: *"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."*

The next speaker was Professor Ian Wray, who was representing the Oxton Society. His presentation was entitled: The Small Society: Oxton and its Secret Gardens.

Wray began by giving delegates a flavour of Oxton, which had grown up in the 19th century as Liverpool merchants and local tradesmen made their homes there on the sandstone ridge overlooking the town of Birkenhead. Oxton is now a Birkenhead suburb. Wray explained that the Oxton Society was established before 1979 and that a Conservation Area had been designated in the area.

The Oxton Society was involved in various projects like: planning applications and engineering works; tree work and tree planting; Christmas lights and summer baskets; guided walks and history; issues relating to dogs and pavements; and newsletters and the Oxton Design Award. The key theme to these projects was income generation.

The main focus of the presentation was the annual Secret Gardens of Oxton event. Since 2001 75 gardens had been involved, which had attracted 36,000 visitors and £195,000 had been raised. £49,000 of that had funded Oxton projects. The 2011 event had involved 300 volunteers and had attracted 4,000 visitors.

Wray also talked how the Oxton Society had tried to engage with business in the area and establish good business relations. The Oxton Society saw localism as a threat, having built up good working relations with the Local Council, they had received funding and tried to influence policy, for example they had worked on Conservation Area character appraisal in order to develop a management plan. The Oxton Society had other "wishes" rather than a neighbourhood forum. The Oxton Society was happy to work with the Local Authority but not to take over its work.

In terms of wider benefits, saying 'no' was not enough for community groups. What was important was things like: fund raising: animation, volunteers and engagement; event management; and building a community.

As a final reality check, with reference to the Localism Bill, Wray made the point that if all communities became active it would put huge pressure on Local Authorities' resources. This reinforced Chetwyn's points about local skills, capacity and resources, again.

The next speaker was Elaine Griffiths MBE, from Gorton Monastery in Manchester. Her talk was on the theme of Social Enterprise and Sustainable Communities. The monastery was designed by Pugin and built about 150 years ago. The Franciscan monks had involved the community from the early days and industry had grown up around it.

In the 1970s the area suffered from industrial decline and it saw slum clearance, it lost its community and the building was stripped out. There was a scheme to turn the building into flats but this did not come to fruition; instead squatters moved in and the building deteriorated. The monastery is Grade II* listed. It was put on the World Monuments Fund Watch List of 100 Most Endangered Sites in the World in 1997.

Griffiths explained that following a 12 year fundraising campaign, The Monastery of St. Francis & Gorton Trust, a Building Preservation Trust, was established in 1996. Local groups were set up like the Gorton Choir and the Gorton Philharmonic. These local groups were vital to making the building a centre piece for the community again.

After a further ten years of fund raising work began on site in 2005 and the building was opened in 2007. It needed to be commercially run, i.e., a social enterprise. In that way the focus could stay on the community. It is used for conferences, dining and corporate events and weddings and it has become an award winning venue. This sort of success brings a 'halo effect' which can bring further successes, but the commercial model has remained the focus.

Griffiths explained that the Trust still owns the building and the question now is about the future: what can the Trust do with the building? There are proposals to create a Monastery Community Village, to take control of the Monastery's setting. This will require sponsors and dialogue is underway. Academic links are seen as part of this project too.

There is an opportunity to build on the Trust's success and create a sustainable community for the future. Sustainable living has to be about re-cycling buildings, but it is also about bringing back skills and it is part of the health and well-being agenda.

The next speaker was Michael Scammell, Historic Buildings Officer for the South Downs National Park Authority. His presentation was about creating local lists. Scammell had worked as a conservation officer in various parts of Cheshire – most recently for Cheshire East Council. The local lists he discussed were from that part of the country.

Scammell explained that unless the area under consideration is very compact you will need local input and experience and help. There had been a long history of local lists in the North West. The idea of Local Lists originated with PPG15 and PPS 5 and with the concept and developed it. It was clearly enshrined in (PPS 5) HE7 and

clarified in Annex 2. It was all about the inclusivity agenda as opposed to exclusivity and the cult of the expert.

When creating Local Lists it is necessary to set some guidelines. It is important to decide quite how 'local' you want the system to be and establish whether there is any need for consistency. Representativeness is an issue: who speaks for a locality and who makes the decisions in a locality? Other questions need to be considered at the outset like: is there still a place for expert opinion? This is linked to the question of whether the system actually supports local aspiration and how much weight it will carry in terms of local opinion. Obviously criteria for selection need to be established. Should that be simply architectural and historic character or should it be wider than that?

In east Cheshire, there was an inherited position. The unitary authority of Cheshire East assumed power on 1st April, 2009. It constituted the former authorities of: Macclesfield, Congleton and Crewe & Nantwich. Macclesfield had an established Local List, adopted the year before that new unity authority took over; Congleton had no Local List but had been preparing one on dissolution; and Crewe and Nantwich had a Local List as an appendix to the Local Plan.

Across the three former borough council areas, Parish Councils and Amenity Societies had been consulted and involved to different degrees. Some had made some strange nominations and there were some problem cases, however, the amenity societies gave by far the most reliable and consistent responses including what Scammell deemed *crème de la crème* nominations.

Scammell ended by highlighting some lessons for the future. First, 100% coverage will not be achieved. Second, work-groups will vary enormously in confidence and competence, so support and guidance will be needed. Third, submissions will need expert screening before being adopted. Finding a critical friend is a good idea and avoid being narrow-minded.

After lunch delegates were able to take advantage of one of two walking tours in the adjacent Castlefields area: 'the canals walk' led by Jonathan Schofield a registered blue badge guide and 'the Liverpool Road Gateway walk' led by Carole Middleton and Ian Christie from the Castlefields Forum.

The final session of the afternoon was all about Project Delivery. The first speaker in this session was Sara Hilton, the Head of Heritage Lottery North West. Her presentation was about Funding Local Action.

Although the economic outlook is still uncertain, the good news for heritage is that Lottery ticket sales have remained extremely strong. Additionally HLF's share of good causes income has increased recently, from 16.7% to 20%. These two factors mean HLF will have much larger awards budgets in the next few years than they had expected.

UK-wide annual awards budgets 2009 – 2013 will rise annually from £180m to £300m; and the regional budgets from 2009 – 2012 will rise annually from £7.3m to £10.2m;

the 2012 – 13 figures were still to be confirmed. This was heart-warming news after the earlier news about EH's budgets.

Delegates were reminded of HLF's strategic aims, which can be summarised as conservation, engagement and education. HLF aims to "*conserve the UK's diverse heritage for present and future generations to experience and enjoy*"; to "*help more people, and a wider range of people, to take an active part in and make decisions about their heritage*"; and to "*help people to learn about their own and other people's heritage*".

In attempting to capture public value HLF has adopted an outcomes based approach. The aspiration to keep heritage assets in beneficial use obviously has to be set against the background of unprecedented cut-backs in public spending and the expectation that communities will have to step into the breach and provide services previously undertaken by the state. Hilton cited the Quirk Report and how historic buildings and places could be kept in beneficial use, either by involving private enterprise or community groups, at a much reduced cost to the taxpayer.

Hilton gave some examples of the sort of public assets transfers that have been funded by HLF including: Shoreditch Town Hall, which was one of 36 historic town hall projects in the UK; Sandford Parks Lido in Cheltenham, which was one of the historic swimming pools that had received HLF funding too (projects do not just include buildings); historic landscapes like Arnos Vale Cemetery in Bristol had also received grants, in this case to help cover most of the costs of restoring the historic buildings and monuments on the site and enable the Local Authority to use its CPO powers to acquire the site and then pass it on to a local preservation trust.

In the North West a range of projects have been funded. The Florence Institute for Boys (a.k.a. the 'Florrie') is a community-led project in Toxteth, Liverpool. The project is now on-site to restore the building and bring it back into use as a community centre offering community spaces and business start-up units. Another project involves plans to transform All Souls, a redundant church in Bolton, into a much-needed community centre for a deprived area of town

Hilton pointed out that smaller projects can also help bring real benefit to an area. In addition they allow community organisations to 'cut their teeth' on a project and gain an understanding of HLF processes. The HLF Your Heritage scheme funds these smaller projects and two local examples include: the Canal side Community Centre in Burnley and the historic Parsonage building in Didsbury. The former project is restoring a Grade II listed building which will be available for use by various community groups. In the latter project the Didsbury Civic Society has been funded to create community hub and deliver a programme of events around the building's heritage.

In its work in supporting communities HLF has identified skills and capacity needs in community groups with respect to project delivery. It has taken an 'investment approach'. It funds and assists in feasibility studies and groups have the ability to appoint mentors. Hilton cited the example of Rotunda in Kirkdale, Liverpool. This was a Grade II listed Georgian terraced in another deprived area. There are very few historic buildings left in this locality, which had been cleared for social housing.

The community group involved in Rotunda is the sort of group the Government will be relying on for localism in the Big Society, Hilton said, and the HLF has an appetite for risky projects that would be transformational.

The next speaker was David Trevis-Smith, Chairman of the UK Association of Preservation Trusts (APT). His presentation was entitled: Raising the Stakes: Rescuing Historic Buildings at Risk. His talk was about the work of Building Preservation Trusts (BPTs) and the Localism Bill.

The presentation started with the question of whether the Localism Bill meant we would be raising the stakes or making *mis-stakes*. Trevis-Smith started with some background about the BPT movement. He explained the APT's mission: the 'APT is the voice of Building Preservation Trusts in the UK; it promotes and supports the rescue and sustainable use of historic buildings at risk.

The BPT movement is made up of thousands of people, mainly volunteers, with a vast range of skills and expertise. The APT was established in 1989 and there are now 238 BPT members across the UK and 19 BPTs in the North West. Over 5,000 buildings and structures have been saved, ranging from small follies to large industrial mills and over £2 billion of funding has been raised by BPTs for projects that have been completed; HLF has been a major contributor in recent years.

Trevis-Smith explained that a BPT's primary aim was to save historic buildings at risk. They were not for profit organisations with charitable status and hence had access to funding sources.

He then distinguished between the two types of BPT: the Single Project or Area BPT, which preserves a single building or group of buildings; and the 'Revolving Fund' BPT, which preserves buildings in a specific category, e.g. a type of building, or buildings within a particular geographical area.

The 'Revolving Fund' BPT re-invests any surplus from a completed project into the next project and hence the notion of a revolving fund. Each project involves a number of steps: agreeing terms; option appraisal; identifying preferred scheme; project planning; repair and conversion work; and finally selling the building. When the property market is buoyant few buildings are "gifted" to BPTs and the first step, agreeing term, which normally involves dialogue with an end user, can take time. As a result in recent times there have been fewer examples of BPTs following the revolving fund model.

After discussing a case study project, Trevis-Smith moved on to discuss Building Preservation Trusts and the Localism Bill. He talked about community empowerment and how it could 'raise the stake(holder)s'. Local Referendums would mean BPTs were able to challenge unsympathetic development; and the Community Right to Challenge meant BPTs able to offer to deliver services. The concept of Assets of Community Value raised some issues that still needed to be resolved: for example, would they include Local Lists of heritage assets? Certainly BPT projects would help to retain community assets but would the Right to Bid mean the building went to the highest bidder?

The Planning System reforms would certainly raise the (funding) stakes, Trevis-Smith believed and he gave a few examples. The Community Infrastructure Levy needed heritage to be recognised as key part of an area's physical and cultural infrastructure, in which case BPTs might be potential recipients. Neighbourhood Plans raised questions about Local Authority resources that would be available to provide historic environment expertise and also whether BPTs would be resourced so they could aid balanced representation on Neighbourhood Forum. Trevis-Smith also posed the question of whether Community Right to Build meant BPTs would become 'community corporate bodies'.

On the other hand, would the Planning System reforms result in BPTs losing their stake? For example, the Enforcement proposals needed more legal process to challenge ownership and a simplified process was needed with greater LA powers and resources.

Another issue is "Sustainable Development". This needed defining and the definition needed to recognise social, environmental and cultural benefits, as well as economic ones of heritage-led development – a point which echoed earlier speakers' comments.

This brought Trevis-Smith back to the initial question of whether the Localism Bill meant we would be raising the stakes or making *mis-stakes*. Without resources the aspirations that underpin the Localism Bill would be undeliverable, but in terms of raising the stakes the potential role of BPTs to help deliver the Localism Bill agenda would need to be recognised and focussed enabling resources would have to be provided by Government and funders. It would be a good opportunity to incentivise revolving-fund BPTs.

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