

The Localism Act – a meeting for the Parish Councils of N W Leicestershire 24 February 2012

Introduction

The meeting had been arranged by Andrew Bridgen MP who welcomed attendees. There was a very good turnout from the Parishes with the Council Chamber almost full. The Chair and the Clerk represented Coleorton PC.

National Perspective – James Kingston, Decentralisation Team, Department for Communities and Local Government

The Localism Act came into effect on 15 February 2012. Specific aspects come into force at different times, but most of the below is likely to be happen around April 2012.

Neighbourhood Development Plan

- A Parish Council or group of Councils can develop a neighbourhood development plan which has to be checked by the local authority to ensure cohesion with their plans and is then put to a local referendum.
- Once accepted by referendum, no planning applications are needed if the development is within the plan.
- 100+ areas are beginning to pilot the process and funding is available to assist.

Right to challenge

- If communities think public services can be run better they can challenge the delivery of particular services and express an interest in delivering them.
- Groups of statutory bodies can link together or with others eg from the voluntary sector or charities.
- A procurement exercise is then undertaken with time allowed for community groups to develop procurement documents and for staff involved in the current delivery to bid.
- There will be windows of opportunity for challenges as contracts come up for renewal. Local Councils will be informed as this happens.

Community right to bid

- This is a new right for communities to identify assets that are of value to them eg village shop or last pub in the village, to the District Council who will hold them on a register.
- If the owner wants to sell, certain steps will have to be followed such as the publication of an intention to dispose followed by a period of time for the local Council to say whether it wants to bid.
- If the local Council expresses an interest in buying, they will be given another period of time to put the finance together during which the owner cannot sell to anyone else.

General power of competence

- Currently, local Councils can only act in certain areas. This give the right to do anything an individual can do, eg trade, except what is prohibited.

- In order for a Council to have the general power of competence, 2/3 of the Council must have been elected rather than co-opted and the Clerk must be qualified (there are specific qualifications) and trained in the exercise of the power.
- GPOC does not take away any current powers but more can be done with it.

Community budgets

- A local area could redesign services and how money is spent.
- This work is still under development with the aim of implementation in April 2013.

The Open Public Services White Paper talked about making it easier to set up Parish Councils and how services could be delegated. Each area could decide how to operate their services using different models.

Voluntary Action Leicestershire – Kevan Liles, Chief Executive

- Help people to do something for themselves. The aim is to have more voluntary activity to make things happen. VAL recruit local volunteers and work with voluntary groups to increase volunteering.
- Support groups when needed. VAL is committed to local groups taking responsibility for local services, possible in collaboration with neighbouring parishes. They can help with raising money and ways of delivering services.
- The government's aim of building better services has led to the right to challenge discussed above. Kevan pointed out that a challenge is not necessarily agreed and also that if it is, the Parish has to compete with others having opened up the market. However, VAL can help with tendering and with collaboration.
- He also pointed out that it was easy to put assets of community value on a register, but less easy to raise the funds to buy them and to have a viable business plan in order to use them.
- With neighbourhood planning, we need to make sure the money follows the plan.

NWLDC – Christine Fisher, Chief Executive

- NWLDC is working with other Councils in Leicestershire on standards and a code of conduct now that Standards England has been abolished and there is no national code of conduct. We shall be hearing more about this in due course but the aim is to have county-wide code of conduct and arrangements for dealing with issues, including sanctions. Each Council would have to decide whether to accept it or have its own.
- NWLDC has all its own assets on a register but still needs to work out how to hold the register of community assets.
- To operate in the new situation offered by the Localism Act, voluntary groups would have to have more of a business edge.

Question and answer session

- Parish Council precepts will not be capped in 2012/13 but that will be looked at again for 2013/14.
- No one yet seems to know how to manage the movement of money down to any Parish Councils that take on the delivery of more services.