

## Notes from FeCRA meeting held on 27 November 2010 at Newnham College, Cambridge

### Dr Julian Huppert, MP for Cambridge (JH)

#### The Big Society

This idea originated in the Conservative Party election manifesto, but just what is “The Big Society”? There is not much substance to the idea so far: it is more of a slogan. We now need to define it. It could mean the government washing its hands of the responsibility for some services. The Liberal Democrats are trying to produce greater coherence for communities, and to reverse some of the erosion of civil liberties seen under recent Governments. Power needs to be dispersed, giving greater freedom to local groups and individuals.

Cambridge has a good track record already. At present various groups (religious, charities, care services etc) are taking on more responsibilities for delivering services through volunteers. But we are less good at thinking big, and volunteers need positive guidance on taking on new responsibilities and exercising new powers. Cambridge already has many creative and innovative companies, As well as “Cambridge Angels”, Nigel Brown’s “Cambridge Boring Bank” would be good for the city by lending start-up money to new businesses, and could act as a model for similar initiatives elsewhere. We need more social enterprises – businesses with concerns for the environment and various aspects of sustainability, possibly through hybrid business/charity initiatives working in partnership. At present most such organisations are either businesses or charities.

We need to re-think how to define “success” in society. At present we measure it in terms of GDP - this is bad for what people care about, such as health, social justice, and well-being (which is different from happiness). The Government is starting to see how to measure these other concepts. Volunteering also increases a personal sense of well-being, binds communities and creates good relationships. For example, “Street Pastors” provide extra support and complement the efforts of the police. There is a Humanitarian Centre in Cambridge which can help to provide advice and openings for people willing to volunteer.

#### Localism

The Localism Bill has been delayed so not yet seen, but is due out shortly. Power needs to be dispersed from Government outwards, and enabling local councils to work with, rather than just for, their communities, including powers to make decisions locally that central government might not agree with. How do we do this? One example would be to get rid of what is effectively a “tenant tax” on housing revenues, which would then allow all income from Cambridge Council houses to stay in Cambridge.

Local enterprise partnerships should be set up, driven by both local councils and local businesses. It will be up to residents to decide what we want to do and not wait be told. Local bye-laws should be quicker to implement, as the signature of a Minister will no longer required to approve them, so local councils will not have to wait for this: in some cases there have been delays of many years.

Liberal Democrats have always been keen about localism, but it is important where you start. It is not power being granted by government to the people but local people re-claiming their power. We should have power locally to do everything apart from things specifically reserved (e.g. strategic and national matters), and the Government will need to justify to the community their retention of such powers in those respects.

## Councillor Tim Bick, Executive Councillor for Community Development (TB)

### Localism in practice

The City has already taken steps which pre-date the “localism” label, as part of an evolutionary process that started in Cambridge some years ago, in the following ways:

(1) Area Committees (set up in 2003). The aims are to take decisions in local settings; and to involve all partners: Council, police and local people. Surveys show that Cambridge residents are among the highest rated in terms of an ability to influence local decisions, and public attendance at Area meetings has increased tenfold.

(2) This year, the City has sought to refresh its overall vision so that

- more citizens feel they can influence decisions
- pursue individual and community initiatives.

Cambridge is a diverse and tolerant city, which values bringing people together, but there are still inequalities which need to be addressed.

The City now needs to take the 2003 initiatives further. We need to build stronger neighbourhoods. As Cambridge grows we need more consideration of the balance between neighbourhood and city-wide membership, and develop pride and self-confidence everywhere, stimulating wider involvement across the city.

There is now an appetite for a more holistic approach to overcome frustrations arising from the division into County Council/ City Council/ residents. We will have to wait for any possibility of a unitary authority – it is not within our power, and current Government thinking is to discourage any further proposals for the grant of unitary status. In any case there is the potential for some backlash: we might find, as they have done in Cornwall, that the County and not the City becomes the unitary authority.

Meanwhile more use of Area Committees is the way forward. So, the City’s plan is to strengthen the area approach. There is a need to carve up responsibilities differently so what is dealt with in Area Committees is not duplicated centrally.

**The immediate plan** is to run a pilot scheme of enhanced responsibility in North Area Committee. The City Council is also looking to see what other Councils do. We also need to consider the interfaces with the Police, Cambridgeshire County Council, and other local bodies. This plan has been agreed by all City Council members, who share this aspiration about re-organisation.

Decisions will be made in January and the pilot in the North Area will start in April 2011 and will be assessed in April 2012. Meanwhile the Council will try to engage more people in Area Committees, and develop genuine dialogues that are targeted to achieving delivery according to local needs. Residents will be able to help formulate plans and aims for the future.

All committees will:

- be more resident friendly
- have Chairs who shape agendas more creatively, rather than being limited to things passed “down” from the City Council
- involve voluntary organisations and businesses in the community
- have Area websites.
- use the City’s monthly magazine “Cambridge Matters” to provide focus on an area basis

Area Committees will also be encouraged to go for “easy wins” such as by:

- reaching out to bring more people in, to stimulate involvement through more dialogue, rather than passive participation as just an audience
- being more participatory
- devolving more decisions, e.g. for spending Section 106 funds
- separating planning meetings from meetings on other issues
- following up decisions

**Questions Tin Bick puts to us as residents:**

- What is going well in Area Committees, and what obstacles exist?
- What additional powers would we want Area Committees to have?
- What approaches would involve more people?

Please **send any comments/answers** to Tim Bick by email to [tim.bick@btinternet.com](mailto:tim.bick@btinternet.com)

## Question and Answer session

*Q.1 What problems and risk will there be in devolving powers without adequate funding?*

**JH:** Yes, it is a risk, and there is not just a problem with under-funding.

**TB:** The Council puts money into the voluntary sector now but will have less money overall for this in future. It must spend the money it has to maximum effect. The Council would probably put money in as starter funds and then expect local ventures to be self-sustaining, especially using social enterprise initiatives.

*Q.2 Neither of you mentioned the local and national Civil Service. What about the quality of Civil Servants?*

**JH:** The general quality is good but they will have to learn new things, get used to new ideas and recognise that not all new ideas will work. Locally, we have to get away from dependence on Whitehall.

*Q.3 Why is the question of a unitary authority not on the agenda? What mechanism is needed under “Localism” to make it happen, if we feel it is appropriate?*

**TB:** The current Government is against this and it requires their approval. So, there is no hope for the next few years. We could, however, start with “softer” issues in Area Committees in Cambridge. However, Cambridge City would have to guard against the County taking over. We need to think what we really want.

*Q.4 How would localism affect Traffic Management locally? Would the four Areas have separate budgets?*

**JH:** (A former Chair of the Cambridge Joint Traffic Management Committee)

Officers sometimes say “you can’t do it” because of central diktats. Example: the impossibility of having a sign for “no entry except cyclists” which would be appropriate for Cambridge but is not allowed by central guidance, even though signs that say “No Entry except for buses” are allowed.

Such centrally imposed regulations should be subordinate (to local needs), and removing the specific one would save time too.

**TB:** Environmental improvements, and grants to voluntary bodies, are already partly devolved to Area Committees. More such devolution will follow.

**Q.5** *How can we make more planning decisions locally, especially in relation to the Growth Agenda? Is it now no longer necessary to fulfil government housing targets? Why is the City Council not challenging this more? Why do they still insist on stuffing the city with new housing?*

**JH:** There is a problem of not having enough houses in Cambridge. "Middle ground" people are being driven out. There are 7000 people on the waiting list for Council houses. If no new housing is built they will be driven out of the City which will become a paradise for the relatively rich. Note that money will be given to Council from central Government quickly, under the New Homes Bonus scheme, as the new build proceeds rather than, as in the past, after a long delay.

**TB:** We welcome removal of the targets imposed from the centre but some targets will still have to be set locally. There is still a priority need for housing, which must be according to requirements rather than enforced.

**Q 6** *How will people be empowered? Will it just mean more committees and questionnaires? Can some procedures be made simpler? Examples include the case of clearing snow, and other health and safety issues.*

**TB:** It would be great if such issues can now be clarified. We need to fight some residual bureaucratic problems, and proceed via residents' groups.

**JH:** Many health and safety and human rights issues tend to spread about as myths. There is now no need to worry about going ahead with snow clearing, as long as no negligence is involved. There is also an intention to have standard insurance policies available, with small premiums, for community events, to save local residents having to consider these issues themselves.

**Q.7** *There are schemes to improve the life of the people in the city, but the County sometimes seems to treat the City with contempt. What can be done to bring reality into decisions so that they are good in terms of long term spending?*

**JH:** The County Council has issues over spending for Cambridge. The County does not believe in localism. They will not spend money on, for example, Cambridge roads, though the County is responsible. We still need a mechanism to change boundaries, but too much time can be spent on this which is not productive, and it is not desirable to make such changes too often. The Government has a huge reform agenda and there is a limit to what can be done all at once: schools and the NHS are considered a higher priority.

**Q.8** *What is meant by an "enhanced" role for Area Committees?*

**TB:** More meaty agendas. More people involved. Improve the meetings so people want to attend. Have more decisions made there. The pilot scheme will aim to test the feasibility of all this.

***Q 9 Is there a contradiction in devolving power locally while the growth agenda is already decided? How do we get quality in design and sustainability?***

**JH:** The contradictions will be adjusted progressively as the changes develop. A most important point is that the growth targets are no longer imposed.

**TB:** We have to keep big questions to be decided by on a City-wide basis if they have an impact on everyone, e.g. housing need. We will never achieve unanimity, but seek higher involvement on a more localised basis.

***Q.10 How will Police priorities be set?  
How can we get the evidence base for decisions relating to costs of services?***

**TB:** The police in Cambridgeshire have already improved greatly on this.

**JH:** A Home Affairs Select Committee (JH is a member) Police Report is in preparation and shows that “evidence-based policing” (in the costing sense) is still a fairly new concept for police forces generally. “I cannot say more today but the report should be out soon.”

***Q.11 How do we stop localism from being NIMBYism?***

**JH:** Ask people to explain their views. Explore and discuss the differences. Listen to others, but remind them of the wider strategic needs.

**TB:** Enhanced Area Committees could become NIMBYish, but we do not want to lay down rules for what is said or discussed. The traditional approach in Area Committees produces polarisation. We must change to sharing problems and solutions rather than being presented with predetermined Council views, with subsequent argument and all that follows. We should aim to arrive at a consensus. This is hard to structure but this direction is more constructive.

***Q.12 How will choices for city-wide cuts be made, and how can there be wider participation in budgeting?***

**TB:** We don't yet know the details of Cambridge City Council's budget for 2011-12. The City Council has for some years been looking closely at its spending and has a process of rolling review. We have already saved millions and must intensify this. The plan is to protect basic services eg waste collections, and to protect the disadvantaged. If we have only one chance at a decision on a matter with long-term effects, then the Council must protect its ability to make as good a decision as possible with the future in mind, as well considering shorter term considerations.

Next month the City Council will know its budget. The Council will pay attention to results from surveys of local people and the workshops which are being held. Cambridge luckily has some income from its assets.

**Q.13** *If locally-made decisions turn out to be bad, how will an appeal process work? How will the disproportionate influence of those with power and money be stopped? (eg decisions to stop Strawberry Fair)*

**TB:** Planning decisions have a statutory appeal structure. On other matters, the voters' remedy is through the ballot box. At Area Committees there will be more opportunity to examine Councillors' performance. We will try to dilute the effects of those with money and property and to have input from other people too. Our challenge is to create a more uniform structure for decisions and implementation.

**Q.14** *How can ordinary people become more involved? Is there any inspiration or guidance available for us?*

**JH:** The Humanitarian Centre provides guidance for those wishing to volunteer to help run services. Local Residents Associations can also provide a way in to involvement.

Additional advice can be found on the Internet.

**Q.15** *How will we ensure that powers and budgets are retained for services to the disadvantaged, such as grants, and housing for lower social groups?*

**JH:** There may be some misunderstandings about these services but this issue needs to be discussed in detail.

## Feedback from Breakout Groups

### Introduction

The Groups were asked to consider the four questions noted below. The appendices record all the ideas, challenges and opportunities identified individually by attenders in the four Breakout Groups against each question.

1. What items do the City and County Councils (and perhaps central Government) currently undertake, that local groups and communities could address more effectively?
2. What are the obstacles and challenges facing local groups if they are to respond effectively to the issues of Localism and Big Society'? (This could include attitudinal problems.)
3. What specific things might residents do to overcome the obstacles and challenges?
4. How might residents go about shifting attitudes so that people and groups take personal responsibility and are galvanised into participating while local officials learn to give-up power.

### Summary of Breakout Group Findings

The Breakout Groups identified a very large number of items as shown by the length of the appendices which record the information as supplied by the Facilitators from the Post-It notes. While there is a significant level of agreement across the Groups, there were clearly different areas of emphasis.

This section gives an overview of the areas of substantial agreement across the Groups

## Question 1 - What items could local groups effectively address?

For simplicity, this section does not refer to financial issues. Clearly though, local groups taking on tasks currently undertaken by a Council will need finance for many parts of the new responsibilities. Also, some of the items listed cannot be delivered with major changes in the legislative framework set by central Government.

### General

- Need for clarity of roles , responsibilities, and funding
- Setting local priorities, including the definition of housing needs (numbers and mix)
- Planning and Development – use of S.106, building design quality, compliance with approved plans and conditions

### Physical Environment

- Management/maintenance of local recreation facilities and use of green spaces
- Management/maintenance of community facilities
- Leveraging available schools' buildings
- Keeping streets, footpaths and other areas clear of rubbish and obstructions

### Social Environment

- Anti-Social behaviour reductions
- Run community/area events
- Organise “good neighbour” programmes
- Approve licensing applications

### Services

- Support of the Elderly
- Management of local library

### Transportation, Traffic, & Parking

- Local parking restrictions and coherent enforcement
- Design of cycling facilities and traffic signing
- Monitor observance of speed limits

### Green and Energy Issues

- Distribute motivational material and run events

## Question 2 - Challenges and Obstacles

This question was addressed from the standpoint that “To leverage localism, we must find ways of overcoming the challenges and obstacles that exist.

### Mind-sets

- “We can’t because .....”
- Do not have time
- Individuals have been progressively more and more disempowered over decades. It’s “their” responsibility
- Resistance to accepting “guidance” from volunteers
- Cynicism from past discouragement: we can’t do everything, so no point in starting anything
- My rights, not my responsibilities, obligations, etc.

**Status Quo Interests**

- Ideological and influential loud voices
- “I did not say you could, so you may not.”
- Obstruction by officials who may see risks to their continued employment
- Fear of the unknown
- Party politics

**Legislation and related**

- Criminal Records Bureau checks
- Insurance demands related to spurious Health & Safety requirements
- Maintenance of adequate records
- Regulatory barriers – legacy of decades of centralising legislation

**Risks**

- Local takeovers by non-altruistic activists
- Early volunteers become fatigued and related lack of long term sustainability
- Alienation of those not involved
- NIMBYism

**Logistics and abilities**

- Many possible volunteers are likely to be very time poor
- Availability of sufficient volunteers: whence?
- Knowledge, experience, skills, and self-confidence of volunteers
- Occasional need for legal advice

**Caveats**

- Accountability to locals, area, city, county, and national
- Need to be accepted as fair; post code lotteries
- Complexity of areas needing change
- Very transient populations
- Loss of economies of scale; “big picture” perspectives may disappear
- Need for mechanisms to reconcile disparate views (not least in zero-sum situations)

**Question 3 - What specific things might we do to overcome the obstacles and challenges?****Communications**

- Community website (NOT part of existing Council site)
- Encourage activists to talk with neighbours
- Enlist local press, radio, and TV

**Build on Success**

- Local “Big Society Award”
- Publicise transfers of responsibility and/or funding



**Learning and Training**

- Start small with early “wins”
- Consider lessons from UK groups and from overseas
- Facilitation and how to deal with conflict
- Seek and distribute “best practice”

**Integrate across society**

- Work with young people, through schools, clubs, and activities

**Seed corn Investment**

- Initiatives with potential to become self-financing

**Assure long term continuation of initiatives**

- Establish cross political party support for Localism

**Question 4 - How do we go about shifting attitudes so that people and groups take personal responsibility and are galvanised into participating.****Ensure early successes**

- Start small – on “soft” targets
- Creative use of Section 106 funding
- Ensure availability of local recreation and community centres
- Rolling three year budget for agreed programmes
- Publish examples of local opinion influencing decisions

**Better working with officials (in the Councils, Police, and other statutory bodies)**

- Review Council processes to simplify and enhance localism prospects
- Retrain officials to educate, train, and mentor locals with their initiatives

**Make it Fun (or at least, psychologically rewarding)**

- Receptions/parties to celebrate projects’ successful completion

**Share Successes – provide recognition**

- Cambridge “Big Society” award
- Publicise powers (and related finance) being devolved to local groups

**Find ways of getting all age groups involved**

- Communal facilities wherever practical (including school and church facilities)
- Locally run projects for NEETs
- “Can we do it? Yes we can!” publicity in media

**Question 1 What items could local groups effectively address?****1. Fundamentals**

- “Generally I don’t think that local groups could address items more effectively.”
- These are questions of democracy – councils are elected
- No point in delegating responsibility without the transfer of adequate funding,
- Anti-social behaviour
- Housing development: Future housing developments must have good services, shops, GP surgeries, etc., to help assure cohesive communities.
- Attractive and functional Community Centres to facilitate bonding through locally generated activities and events.
- Schools

**2. Environment**

- Recreational facilities and care of them
- Resident’s parking and other local parking restrictions
- Licences for alcohol selling
- Traffic management
- Use of Green spaces

**3. Services**

- Better public transport (eg bus route – Newnham to station)
- 20 mph speed limit in City Centre
- Pollution in the City Centre
- City cycling scheme based on London’s Boris Bikes
- Social care for the elderly
- Pre-school nursery provision
- Community development

**4. Other**

- Outsource the functions
- Central Library
- Independent schools
- Disinterested deliberative discussion of development issues (Growth of Cambridge) linked with exhibition/display of current proposal and availability of data and information.

**Question 2 Challenges and Obstacles****1. Community & Fairness (9)**

- Transfers of funding
- Accountability to the community (not privatisation)
- Fair representation of all in the community
- Involving the less vocal and/or vulnerable groups
- Avoidance of local post-code lotteries: intolerance of different standards in different neighbourhoods.
- Power shifts needed
- No constitutions
- What is (are) the mandate(s)
- Social enterprises
- Social responsibilities
- Empowering local councillors to promote localism
- Coordination of initiatives
  - to avoid duplication
  - to encourage spread of good practice

**2. Resources (8)**

- Willingness & capacity of individuals to do more
- Sustaining and leveraging the essence & vigour of the community (will resist being marshalled & corralled)
- Availability of volunteers – limited time available
- Ideological opposition from influential people
- Involving the time-poor
- Long term sustainability
- Empowerment of all types of individual
- From where will the relevant qualified (capable?) people come?
- Discouragement of CRB checks

**3. Know-how (2)**

- Access to knowledge, resources, and skills
- Assistance for groups starting-up

**4. Environment (2)**

- Avoidance of rule-book bullying by officials

**Question 3 Overcoming challenges / obstacles**

- Creative use of Section 106 funding
- Government and Councils to focus on supporting & facilitating, not on staffing and spending money
- Power shift
- Working with young people
  - Sports team
  - Cadet groups
  - Duke of Edinburgh
- Blend life experiences of the older with the energy of the young.
- Use of the Internet (can help everyone, not just those with access at home)-
  - Doit.org
  - PledgeBank.com
  - GroupsnearYou.com
- Give credibility and support to RAs as warranted (not one-man speakers!)
- RAs to be clear how representative expressed views are.

**Question 4 Shifting Attitudes**

- Identify and support advocates and champions to explain how Localism can work.
- Get the young involved
- Local Government to be more welcoming to local initiatives
- Raise awareness of loss of services to galvanise people
- Promote neighbour care of local elderly
- Learn lessons from community activism when the County Council took away the village libraries.
- Mentoring
- Recognition of individuals for their participation
- Ensuring local groups and communities are accountable (& not run by self-appointed individuals)
- Establish a Schools' policy for activism
- Establishment of a national/regional/Cambridge process for community service
  - Eg 18-26 years old NEETs paid to spend time (3 months?) on community projects
  - To encourage activism, engagement, and an appetite for community volunteering
- Government website with ideas, guidance, case histories, etc

**Question 1 What items do the City and County Councils (and perhaps central Government) currently undertake, that local groups and communities could address more effectively?**

Discussion concluded that local and national government must devolve more power and follow the principle of subsidiarity and decentralise decisions to the lowest appropriate level.

**Parking**

- Power to do something when someone parks in our driveway that should have not
- Traffic warden policing our area of Milton Road and giving tickets out when they find cars parked where they should not have
- Planning controlling developers actions and not disregarding our gardens and properties
- Not giving planning permission where development needs parking
- Residents' parking bays: for example reserved for residents 9 a.m. – 8 p.m. after 8 p.m. anyone can use them until 9 a.m. next morning e.g. visitors to late night facilities in the city centre preventing residents being able to park if they return after 8 p.m. Solution (a) extend hours to midnight; and (b) empower residents to issue tickets to enforce the restriction. (Park Street Area problem)
- Parking in Newnham Croft: residents are clear that the current situation of no paid parking is the optimal for supporting local shops: commuters stop to shop without being deterred by meters but every few years the council propose meters and residents have to defend the status quo.
- Defining parking spaces for disabled people
- Parking regulations – information on abuse – enforcement – civil (as opposed to criminal) policing (police are very bound by national ratings) – knowing what funds are available for what
- Residents to have control of parking restrictions in their road, problem of commuters

**Planning**

- Section 106 money use – residents to decide on use – no transfers to other areas
- Planning approvals – use of developer “contribution” – approving low level changes
- Planning Issues – influencing processes
- Planning – policing whether developers have complied with conditions attaching to planning approvals
- Introduction of design standards for new developments, e.g. the NIAB site.
- Requirement for highest (world leading) standards of sustainability in North West Cambridge new building

The process for agreeing a conservation area appraisal – the Council commissioned the West Cambridge draft from consultants outside Cambridge – residents took a lot of time and trouble to contribute and to correct mistakes of both detail and emphasis – now all is silence, the final shape of the document is out of our hands.

**Licensing**

Licensing (liquor) – Licensing Act 2003 has failed in several of its objectives – widespread late night anti-social behaviour disturbs city centre residents. Involve local residents in licensing decisions.

**Insurance**

Cost of public liability insurance is a heavy financial burden on voluntary groups. Could City Council underwrite the cost or organise a city-wide policy for many or all voluntary groups?

**Transfer of Responsibility**

Transfer responsibility for the following from Cambridgeshire County Council: management of 35,000 acres of farmland with 274 tenants; museums and galleries

Transfer responsibilities for the following to other experienced organisations:

- Local nature reserves
- Conservation Areas
- Country field paths
- Nature conservation and wildlife
- Village greens
- Sports grounds
- Management of local public facilities - e.g. recreation grounds and libraries to maximise local benefit
- Keeping open spaces clean- problem bins and their clearance

Use of school facilities for meetings, e.g. Neighbourhood Watch – schools want to be paid but Neighbourhood Watch has no trading income.

Transfer responsibilities for the following: out of school activities; play groups; social clubs and young people's activities

Use local area funds for local services – e.g. extra ranger or litter bins (more than one respondent wanted more bins)

Enforcement of rules by local people – especially for dog fouling and litter.

### **Transport**

Transport integration: setting bus timetables; setting cycle lanes; setting speed limits and setting traffic free zones

Priorities for public transport services – more responsiveness to needs/short journeys – better services out of hours – more shared taxis and other solutions

Routing bus services

Locating bus stops to suit local users rather than commuters – e.g. reinstate use of New Square bus stops for all buses.

Cycle routes – maintenance, gritting, planning, signage

30 mph speed limit on Huntingdon Road

Pedestrian light where Lady Margaret Road meets Madingley Road, outside Lucy Cavendish College.

### **Housing**

Introduction of housing for genuine key workers (not visiting academics) into North West Cambridge site

**Question 2 What are the obstacles and challenges facing local groups if they are to respond effectively to the issues of Localism and Big Society'? (This could include attitudinal problems.)**

#### **Our weak areas**

Lack of knowledge and experience to deal with devolved issues

Lack of interest?

Resources – money – expertise – inability to 'fight' vested interest with greater resources

Time, knowledge, self-confidence

Time and resources required in order to take up slack if Council devolves power and reduces their resources spent on activities

Time. All are busy with their lives. Involvement is very time consuming.

Complexity. Procedures/protocols/Local government jargon are all daunting, especially to the people you wish to involve more – working class (as well as us middle class people)

Information – Time – Money – Lip-service – Council support

**MONEY**

The right PEOPLE who can genuinely make it work

Moving population in Cambridge

Some people have less time to volunteer e.g. working parents so participation is unrepresentative

### **Reasons people are put off**

Discouragement when people realise that so-called consultations are not really seeking new ideas

Cynicism – because “consultation” has so often appeared to be a one-way (top-down) process

When local people give up their time and are consulted their contributions and ideas are ignored.

People then think “Why bother? The powers that be take no notice!”

Residents feeling disempowered – being used to housing officers, police, social services &c. sorting out problems for them

Some feel committees are very intimidating fora to get involved in

### **Institutional weaknesses**

Are Area Committees still too big for real ‘localism’?

Committees/Groups culture is very archaic – based on chairman model rather than facilitator and participatory processes like post-it notes!

Entrenched methods of working by councils. Central legislation of planning appeals disillusion locally.

Obstruction by local officers because it may threaten their jobs to devolve power

The disproportionate power in Cambridge and in local areas within Cambridge of the Colleges

### **Community weaknesses**

Interest from local community

Destroying communities by building a lot of student accommodation the area becomes a student campus with little or no interest in the locality

Availability of time

No culture of conflict resolution skills at community level especially in poorer communities

Involving everyone not just special interests

How are the local groups formed? Is it democratic?

Local groups being taken over by ‘narrow interest’ members. Governance rules needed.

A voluntary group needs a good secretary to take minutes, circulate agendas, write letters &c. Such people are hard to recruit from volunteers. Easier perhaps if modest payment available.

How do they satisfy the local authority that they represent local opinion? Risk of domination by the vocal and those who have the time.

Local groups want access to legal opinion. Can this be provided free?

### **Q3 What specific things might we do we overcome the obstacles and challenges?**

Participate and Engage – Publicise

Involve many more home owners and tenants in local issues and Big Society

Form groups of our own such as residents associations and green pressure groups in order to press the councils on various issues

Complain about so-called consultations for which it becomes clear there had been no room or will for manoeuvre, intending to change the culture so that when councils invite comment they always mean it.

Local Associations need to be much more representative in local issues

Give more power to local Residents' Associations in Localism and Big Society meetings and issues.

Talk to our neighbours to get evidence and information

Try to make meetings and events more interesting

Communicate with neighbours

Try to convince people that if they support the community they may have more power.

Keep an eye on planning website

Circulate E-mails to friends to keep them informed of issues

Councillors should attend residents' meetings to discuss issues

It's hardly for 'us' but the role of the law is often to be seen as niggling and obstructive

#### **Q4 . How do we go about shifting attitudes so that people and groups take personal responsibility and are galvanised into participating while local officials learn to give-up power.**

Central government needs to shift significant power to local authorities – the culture needs to change from top down as well as bottom up

Participate in groups like CPPF (Cambridge Past Present and Future) and area wide associations of residents' associations

CPPF is a good example on how things work in Cambridge. Increase membership and encourage younger people to join the organisation.

Retrain local government officers to serve by consulting and heeding.

More support for local groups/people to turn to for advice/specialist knowledge

Ensure that officials listen so that people feel it is worth their time and effort to get involved

Councils must listen even more to input. People will then feel that their voice is being heard

More meaningful participatory decision making models involving children in schools – to build skills and experience in younger generation

Discount of rates

Build capacity of tenants and tenants' associations to organise and have a voice and influence housing associations and landlords.

Give them (presumably local groups) power, talking shops will not work – allow local officials to join with local groups - Include not Exclude

Give examples that local opinion is effective in influencing councils

Show, by acting on what is already in the pipeline, that it is being done as residents want

If councils do less then residents may have to do more

Magic Wand!

**Question 1 What items could local groups effectively address?**

- Local ownership of priorities and communities
- Need evidence gathering and followed by training at neighbourhood level and ward level – broad diverse understanding of local priorities
- Environment: Locals can participate in maintenance, cleaning and improvement of recreation grounds/play areas/open spaces/natural areas. Footpath maintenance, cultural and community activities, litter picking, tree planting, sustainability projects
- Need detailed local conservation assessments – appraisals to reduce carbon foot print
- Voluntary / social groups – could run day care centres, play groups, youth clubs, after school clubs, sport centres, events eg folk festival, big day out, support people with long term needs eg long term unemployed – more effective than a job centre
- Safety e.g. safer city/homes – improve security – and more consultation on police priorities
- Conservation appraisals
- Parking & Traffic calming – introduce tighter restrictions – and right down to street level – not county level
- Take control of streets and anti social behaviour
- Local planning decisions – improve public engagement & consultation – lobby government eg e-petitions – response to public consultations has withdrawn interest especially when the response is 'your communication has been received' – no further acknowledgement – nor information on results of matter consulted on.

**Question 2 Challenges and Obstacles - Constraints to community involvement**

- Need to be realistic and simplify what can be done by locals. – don't expect all to be done locally
- Need resources for local people – money, time, skills, property
- There needs to be accountability for decisions made as local groups cannot just go off and do what they want
- A lot of initiatives require start up funding, yet need financial responsibility – legitimisation/ structures in place (open/democratic)
- Lots of regulatory barriers locally and nationally – some good some bad
- Need legislation eg insurance, health and safety, child protection, financial liability for events organisers
- Need to understand what is a community – not necessarily geographical – may be a focal point round an issue – how do we devolve?
- Focusing on localism may mean losing economies of scale
- May need service level agreements
- Greater understanding of grants process – overcome red-tape – develop trust – how budgets are funded and defined – budget finance and accounting procedures
- Involves risk taking for community returns – again need evidence base to see what can be done
- Get politics out of local government
- Must not alienate – OK for the articulate to be involved but what about others eg young people, old people, BME
- Make sure those involved are representative of whole community
- Education and training to empower people to live responsibly and respect others. At moment it is a blame culture especially of councils
- Encourage people to become proactively involved
- Inertia/ partnership fatigue – who has time to give to participation? – competing claims



- Don't want talking shops and selected community
- Need to avoid culture of those who shout loudest – tension/ NIMBYism – few local people want to have their opinion enforced – extremely difficult to get whole areas agreeing on everything
- Area work not area committees – word committees a turn off.
- Parish councils for instance – can create social exclusion, political elites, negativism
- Evidence of school governance – time consuming/problems

### Q3 & Q4 - Overcoming challenges / obstacles and Shifting Attitudes - Solutions

- Need to smile – create caring society – emoticons
- Need matrix/grid model to look at functions/structures of community involvement and not to exclude any ideas – needs therefore to be flexible
- Hope to achieve self sufficiency/sustaining models of involvement – but be aware that not one model – need varied models and loose criteria to legitimisation
- Community of interests – not necessarily geographical – but located groups, networks of interest groups
- Best practice – learn from each other – economise on what can do then – more effective working – less paper work and more action on the ground if adopt a balanced approach – best communities can do and best councillors and officers can do
- Learn from Lula's People power local movement in Brazil. Gaian Democracies by Madron – published by Schumacher foundation
- Get people more involved/ proud – so need attitude of change
- From very young to very old – de-bunker people to get the fences down
- Need to Set up simple/ single measures for devolving budgets, removing legal constraints
- Grants should be paid over a longer time – local community should not be going from pillar to post to enact change
- Focus on what children want and linked with elderly – ie inter-generational approach & more of a balanced approach – how they want developments in their local community
- Communal spaces and facilities should help aid social interaction
- Media are important to communicate positive messages about community involvement
- Need Inspirational examples/champions – this is key – early winners/ visible – yet focus always on quality too
- Need soft targets – to encourage public support
- Start small eg single parks, events
- Share news of success – best practice
- Need to overcome constraints – eg tensions around access to IT or access to power
- Councils should be applauded for efforts on area committees but more can be done. – improve best practice
- Bureaucratic structures should be enlivened
- Local politicians should be supported but need outreach workers
- Neighbourhood forums needed for overview of city wide issues
- Need to think locally act globally – as need to reduce carbon footprint needs to be one of the drivers – self sufficiency at local level – and sustainability priorities at heart of debate – the process to achieve this – localism/big society is to deliver on these wider global goals
- Need improved one stop information provision, e.g. planning permission information services – where to look eg for new rules on solar plans, on micro-generation certification, website – not a city council website
- Politicians need to devolve/relinquish power to achieve this

**Question 1 What items could local groups effectively address?**

- 1. Managing Community Centres / facilities and running session in them (7)**
  - need some support from the Council?
  - cafes, meeting places
  - running local events for the community
  - helping to develop new facilities eg redundant church in Cherry Hinton Rd
  - running adult education classes / common interest groups
- 2. Traffic and parking street scene (5)**
  - make decisions on topics like traffic and residents parking
  - manage residents parking in local area
  - local street signage decisions
  - traffic calming decisions
  - design in local conservation area and new developments
- 3. Open Spaces (5)**
  - management of parks and open spaces
  - vegetation planning, pruning etc
  - litter collection (3)
  - management of children's play areas
- 4. Developing the environmental agenda (4)**
  - energy education
  - reducing energy consumption
  - working with local people to cut water and energy bills
  - waste: better separation of waste including organic matter for bio-fuels, moving to anaerobic digestion rather than incineration
- 5. Deciding priorities for environmental and social improvements in local area (3)**
  - decide how money for improvement in local area should be spent
  - devolve control of section 106 monies, ensure transparency
- 6. Elderly (2)**
  - give thought to the consequence of a rapid increase in aged population, help them stay in their homes and to feel life is still interesting ("life expectancy is increasing by 6 hours per day")
  - meals on wheels, good neighbour schemes
- 7. Others**
  - Licensing of premises including off licence premises (1)
  - Public art and arts events (1)
  - Entertainment – street parties, festivals, fairs (1)
  - Need to redraw some area boundaries because of the disparate concerns / issues in current designated areas (1)

**Note: This question should be asked of all local community agencies, voluntary groups to get engagement, not just carrying out consultation on council proposals**

## Question 2 Challenges and Obstacles

1. **Finance - clarity on what money will be available for what and how (everyone supported this)**
2. **For Government, Local officials and Councillors (8)**
  - cutting red tape, mindless regulations
  - over-bureaucratic and inflexible internal council structure, and job justification mentality
  - overcoming a 'you cannot do that' mentality
  - some so called Health & Safety issues are a waste of council time and money eg surveying a site before a litter collection
  - need for a culture change
  - rebranding committees
  - learning not to hold on to power / elitism
3. **Getting full engagement (6)**
  - dangers of over-dominance of certain interest groups / activists with strong opinions eg religious views, green views etc 'he who shouts loudest...'
  - how to hear the silent majority?
  - getting a representative sample of residents involved
  - how to cope with apathy
  - problems of motivating a largely passive population unless there is a common cause eg NIMBYism to a new development
4. **For local people (5)**
  - availability of volunteers to take responsibility for new activities
  - time constraints of current volunteers; many are already far too busy
  - changing attitudes from 'my rights' to 'how can I contribute?'
  - people at the top may be expecting too much of local people in terms of unpaid volunteering
5. **Availability of expert advice (5)**
  - having someone to refer to for advice when taking on new responsibilities
  - financial and professional support
  - awareness of boundaries – what are the legal and admin constraints?
  - what liabilities are they taking on?
  - legal barriers to facilitating volunteering effort
  - having access to relevant information
6. **Sustainability (3)**
  - dangers of handing over to groups who then lose interest or where the original people who provided the driving force move on or die
  - reconciling disparate views, interests and attitudes
7. **Communications (3)**
  - consultation fatigue
  - need for plain English not 'councilese'
  - having the skills to disseminate information
  - making people aware of local groups eg Residents Associations

## 8. Other points (3)

- Need to educate - start in schools, encouraging people to take an interest
- Keeping national politics out of localism / big society issues (1)
- Keeping the big picture in mind – when handling small very local issues (1)
- Identifying the opportunities and matching effort to need (1)
- Getting money from business investment (1)
  - how to encourage long term investment from eg pension funds into business
  - how to integrate sustainable issues into enterprise so money is generated in an environmentally responsible and creative manner

## Q3 Overcoming challenges / obstacles

### 1. The majority of the comments related to communications and provision / sharing of information. There was consensus that this was critical.

- Better circulation of info about things which will affect your neighbourhood and area, and the city as a whole
- Use of websites and blogs
- User friendly, easy access information and guidance
- Better processes for liaison between officers / councillors and local people
- Make Area Committees more of a debating / discussion session with local residents (at least for part of the time)
- Develop the role of local newspapers to increase awareness. Free newspapers can help.
- Provide a wide variety of events to interest a range of people
- Local community notice boards and in the central library (2)

### 2. Several people commented on the need to bring people together to share ideas, pool resources, learn about best practice. This meeting was cited as a good example of that.

### 3. Education

- provide training for community activists with particular encouragement for disadvantaged areas
- education to try to change attitudes – not easy but try to bring together local groups to explore possibilities and get across the idea that people can help and benefit (like today's meeting)
- train young people to get volunteering skills and experience (useful for their future employment as well as contributing to big society)

### 4. Funding

- a funding pot for local initiatives that community groups can bid for.
- small amounts of funding to help local groups get established
- provide a toolkit / materials for local activists
- provide template websites
- financial help with communications ie websites creation for local groups
- use money and resources to stimulate voluntary activity
- funding for notice boards, websites (3)

**5. Remove silos**

Try to find ways of gradually moderating the influence of narrowly focused specialists and get them to see the wider picture (today's process is a good way to address the problem)

**6. Integration**

Making use of local businesses, connecting them to voluntary organisations

Brainstorm creative ways of engagement

**Q4 Shifting Attitudes****1. Better working with council officers (8)**

- officers to be trained to delegate powers not hold on to them, means a change of roles from upholders of the rules to enablers. "Can do" rather than "cannot do" mentality.
- direct meetings with residents, not going through the hierarchy
- officers need to demystify not hide behind rules and jargon
- work to create a wider culture of empowerment with officers genuinely working with local groups to facilitate not constrain
- officers to work with local groups on specific projects

**2. Make it fun (3)****3. Publicise and share successes. Reward successes (2)****4. Must find ways of working with all ages groups including schools (3)**

- hook them while they are young
- avoid preponderance of grey people in community activism
- Help those who have time, like older people, to realise they can contribute and enjoy it.
- Work through existing bodies eg RAs, charities, churches etc
- Active effort, with small funding, to set up more Residents Associations, if necessary by helping a local activist to do door to door calls.
- Set up workshops for workers (say lunchtime), secondary schools, universities

A number of comments were very broad eg creative engagement, create a sense of belonging, create a sense of ownership, involve communities in identifying obstacles, finding solutions

**Question 1 - What items could local groups effectively address?**

- Allocation of Section 106 Money
- Organisation of and priorities for the maintenance of common land

**Question 2 Challenges and Obstacles**

- Health and Safety
- Public Liability Insurances
- Data Protection Act concerns regarding the sharing of contacts
- Criminal Records Bureau rule-book
- Information about plans and awareness of related issues
- Activities and influence of single issue action groups

**Q3 Overcoming challenges / obstacles**

Education and training for

- Working together
- Identification of relevant issues and others' programmes
- Awareness and understanding of the Law, Regulations, and Regulatory Bodies
- Website for all RAs
- On-line resources for training, publicity, collated calendar of events, etc
- Seeking out easy successes initially
- Subsidiarity
- Parachute experts into groups to guide "on-the-job"

**Q4 Shifting Attitudes**

- Work with the press to create from success stories, groundswell of confidence that "we can do it"
- Cambridge version of the Government "Big Society Award"?
- Case studies of success – written/recorded and live presentations