**Rother Localism Workshop**

**Monday 30 January 2012**

**Final Report**

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4. **Executive Summary**

**Localism and Parish and District Government**

Resourcing the opportunities and challenges of localism was uppermost in delegate’s minds.

The issue of devolving services was problematical with the need to balance economies of scale with local needs. Some localities such as Rye want more independence to determine their own service.

Closer working between towns and parishes, joint working in clusters to plan and provide services was a key opportunity.

The role of volunteers was discussed, some see the replacement of current volunteers a real challenge with not many new people coming forward.

The role and capacity of local councillors was discussed, along with a consideration of the health of democratic structures at a local level. Local leadership was considered very important in localism, alongside effort put into community engagement. Quality council status and the powers of competence were discussed

Communication, sharing learning and opportunities to discuss progress were important. Data exchange and profiling would invaluable. Particularly useful would be some focussed case studies.

The role of young people needed to be nurtured and more understanding acquired of communities in transition. Deprivation might prevent the rollout of localist activity.

Better use of community assets was encouraged, including intangible assets such as friendship groups, local services and other community activity.

It was agreed that we need to develop skills, knowledge and understanding of localism, through RALC, SALC and others.

It was considered that there might be resistance to change in some localities, that some people preferred to have their services provided by others but current financial conditions meant that we needed to find new ways of working.

**Localism and Planning**

The issue of neighbourhood planning was uppermost in peoples’ minds. Some were looking forward to the opportunity for local people to have a potentially greater involvement in development, a greater empowerment. Others took a more sceptical approach to how this might work in practice.

The issue of skills to undertake or commission planning tasks at local level was discussed.

Resource limitations were a concern and those present were sceptical that there would be sufficient funds to allow for additional work, fr example a community referendum. This was a particular issue for small parish councils.

There were concerns about the risks of litigation around local planning decision making.

Local councils were interested to hear more about how the Community Infrastructure Levy was going to be rolled out locally. Officers confirmed that they would be visiting local councils in the spring to move forward on this and the Site Allocations policy.

**Localism and Housing**

The detail of housing changes brought in by the Localism Act was uppermost in peoples’ minds. The impact of changes in housing services in Rother was likely to be considerable when considered alongside welfare system changes and other reform.

The costs associated with housing homeless families were likely to rise.

Local exceptions housing wouldn’t necessarily be affected by in-migration from other areas, being restricted to local tenants.

Flexible tenancies, although not a new concept in Rother, would be rolled out further. They gave social landlords greater flexibility in using their stock, particularly family sized accommodation. The changes signalled a move away from social housing for life. None of the changes could be imposed retrospectively on tenants.

Local parishes were keen to find out more data and information about the profile of housing in the locality.

**Localism and Community Action**

The challenges and demands on local community groups were uppermost in peoples’ minds.

Delegates were concerned about the availability of resources and how groups would cope with change. They thought it very important that Rother District council did not “wash its hands” of services.

The role of volunteers was clearly central to this. It was remarked how difficult it was to find people willing to engage in local action for any length of time. People had very busy lives and often work commitments prevented volunteering.

The potential for community hubs, where services and activities were centralised in a single local location was discussed and endorsed.

It was important to remain accountable for the quality and equity of services.

Young peoples’ involvement was very important, despite reductions in youth services.

Nonetheless there was approval of the opportunities that localism may bring. These included a view that area based approaches might lead to more sustainable services, for instance newsagents, pubs and shops. It was thought that localism may drive greater transparency.

1. **Theme in detail: Localism and Parish and District Government**

A view was expressed that assistance from RDC was needed to fund initiatives. However RDC would be facing a reduced budget year on year for the foreseeable future and this increased the need to make sure the budget was spent well; enabling communities to be sustainable and access and raise their own funding, through local precept or other means, would be essential.

Democratically elected representatives serving on the District Council should have access to a budget for local community initiatives and have responsibility for spending it.

Rye Town Council had been seeking devolution for the last 2 or 3 years but with little success; in theory devolution would be great, but very light in practicalities; Rye was coming from a different approach – following the abolition of Rye Borough Council in 1974 there was still strong local opinion for all the services and assets to be provided and owned locally and taken “back” from RDC.

The Localism Act gave an opportunity for local people to come up with ideas / solutions to local problems; local councillors should have more local accountability and will need to be able to assist communities to find solutions.

Many services had been outsourced and were just monitored and overseen by RDC; more dialogue on how services were delivered locally was essential; if more was outsourced to town and parish councils the benefits of centralised financial control and economies of scale would be lost – the Localism Act at least provided the framework for creating the right dialogue.

The various communities across the district wanted totally different things – devolved budgets would enable communities to be much more flexible on how they spent their money; RDC should work more with its partners and help communities maximise funds.

Local towns and smaller parishes would need to work more closely together to provide solutions to problems and undertake “trade-offs”; many parishes were made up of a complete mix of residents from farmers to city slickers – their priorities and aspirations for their communities would be different.

There was an assumption by Government that there were huge armies of volunteers out in the community waiting to seize the moment and change communities for the better, through the provisions of the Localism Act – this was not the reality.

Only 7 out of 31 town and parishes held an election in 2011 – the remaining 24 were therefore uncontested; even at district level there was difficulty in engaging with possible candidates to stand for election and put themselves forward to serve the community.

The same people put themselves forward within the community to help out – engaging with the others was the difficulty.

Devolvement should be a good thing – locally provided services tailored to meet the needs of local people at an affordable local cost.

It was hoped that by working more closely within communities, the Localism Act would raise the profile of what could be achieved locally and enthuse local young people to get involved.

It was easy to engage communities for time limited focussed events such as the Olympics, Royal Weddings, Jubilee celebrations etc; the challenge was engagement on LAPs etc where 1 or 2 individuals shaped the LAPs for a whole village – this clearly was not representative.

Young people had a lot to teach the older generations – their IT skills were second to none and they could and should be put to better use within their communities.

Mums meeting at school gates were an excellent community – these should be targeted for community engagement.

It was considered that the concept of volunteering within a community would develop over time – there was a trend that most young people looking for employment would need to have completed some form of voluntary work – this always improved their CV.

Data on community demographics across the District would be interesting – Hurst Green had experienced a drastic change in the residential balance within the village; the impact of a poor performing school had also had a great impact on the local school.

The availability of women to be active volunteers and champions within their communities had diminished over time as more and more women were now in employment (over 70% of mums now worked); communities were changing.

The Group had a general discussion about defining the “community”, getting more people involved to take ownership of their communities, supporting local assets and capability of parishes and towns to take assets and services on.

How could the priorities of a community be agreed/set if all the community was not engaged and participated in consultation exercises? How were the views / aspirations of the hard to reach groups taken into account?

RDC had taken a lead role in encouraging town and parishes to update their Local Action Plans; engaging with the hard to reach groups was always difficult, community groups should be part of that process, including those that represent the hard to reach groups.

Those communities that can will, and those that do not have the capability will lose out – there was no extra money for deprived communities.

Often in deprived areas there was no one to lead on community issues.

The Localism Act did not provide a one-size-fits all approach; communities would need to work together, with all interested stakeholders, including the police to shape their communities how they wanted them – the Localism Act provided a framework that had not been spelt out before; much of what had been enabled within the Act was possible for communities before the Act.

Apathy in the wider community was a common concern across the District; most Local Action Plans were driven by the town or parish councils and a small group of interested residents who were involved in everything; efforts had been made to engage with non-councillors over action plans, but with little success; how do you get people involved?

The Police Neighbourhood Panels worked well, however the same interested individuals came to meetings – a different approach of door knocking and going out into the community was going to be adopted; do not wait for the community to come to you, you go to the community.

The LSP would be pleased to hear from those towns / parishes that had successfully identified, funded and delivered projects within their communities; good case studies could assist others.

Were Local Action Plans actually realistic? Some were merely wish lists for communities that wanted everything but which will probably never come to fruition. Local Actions Plans needed to be realistic as well as aspirational; at least communities were being asked what they wanted.

There seemed to be an assumption by Government that there were huge armies of volunteers out in the community waiting to seize the moment and change communities for the better, through the provisions of the Localism Act – this was not the reality.

Communities needed to support community amenities / assets and actually use them – the number of Bexhill residents who supported and visited the Bexhill Museum was low.

The number of people attending meetings of the Bexhill Town Forum had dwindled in recent years and was possibly a reflection of the general apathy across the Town – the Forum was attended by the same people meeting after meeting talking about the same issues, usually in a negative way.

Most members of the public only become engaged if there were plans to do something that they did not like or proposals to take something away, whether they used it or not.

The Post Office closure programme in recent years generated a huge public campaign to save the local POs and shops – however most members of the public did not support their local PO / shop in any event but did not want to see the resource taken away - use it or lose it.

What was the community (e.g. geographical communities vs communities of interest)? Whose responsibility was it to identify? How do we energise the communities to take forward the Localism Agenda?

Some communities had found that if you ask for help, people very often say yes; however, they were more likely to say yes to one-off events rather than commit to any long term arrangements.

Whilst communities may be supportive of the notion of local services being provided locally, paying for them locally, through an increased precept may not be supported – once the true implications were known.

Small parish councils would not be in a position to take on services and assets; the Clerk was very often the only member of staff and they would not be able to take on the responsibility.

Whilst there may be experienced Members willing and able to take on more administrative work now, this would not always be the case; in subsequent years following elections when the make-up of councils could and would change over time there may not be the personalities prepared to do this work and carry the level of responsibility required.

Many parish councils across the district found it difficult enough to recruit Members now through the usual democratic processes, let alone if more responsibility was put upon them.

The Localism Act was here to stay, RDC were keen to embrace the ethos of the Act and work with communities; the Council needed to ensure that it spent its budget as efficiently and as effectively as possible to the benefit of all the communities within Rother.

Concerns were expressed over the costs of the services for the Parish Councils, not such an issue for larger Parishes, but those with smaller household numbers and significantly smaller incomes from precepts do not have the same income generation capacity.

Question was raised on how Parish Councils could provide similar services for less. Advised by TL that current budgets within RDC include support service and management costs that Parish Councils would not require.

Powers of precept setting was considered as a potential for raising funds. Resident in local Parish could look at what they wanted as services and vote on the desire to take on / provide the service after considering the cost to each household.

Discussion were had over the prospect of clusters of smaller Parishes coming together to provide services. Question raised from this discussion was whether Parish Councils were looking at creating mini local authorities to deliver services? Barriers to clusters of joint working were assessed, in the main it was the desire for Parish Councils to remain independent that was the main issue, this would need to be broken down to allow this to progress.

What would stop you using the new powers within the localism bill? In a survey carried out by TL the following was noted;

42% - Financial / lack of money

27% - Mentor / Support – Member and Officer time – not sufficient to carry out the work.

18% - Resistance from other tiers if Local Government

7% - Complexity of powers

6% - Lack of need in Parish

Variable skill sets and management ability of councillors and clerks were also issue.

Lack of community involvement was discussed – “the Big Community” and how to draw in extra resources and skills to take on the new aspects of work. TL was clear the clerks should feel able to address significant work load changes and bring them to the Cllrs, either adding assistant clerks, increasing hours or even looking for external assistance. The challenge to get additional volunteers was highlighted, with a proclamation of successes needed by Parish Councils to sell the achievements and positive impact on the community. People always want to be part of a success!

There is a fear that Parish Councils do not want community involvement, also a significant issue that Parish Councils and their meetings only attract specific socio-economic groups, therefore future decisions may be made by the louder minority, not the silent majority. This was a statement and solutions were not discussed.

Question: Can a ward or local association be treated as an entity. TL advised that yes they can have the same rights. In some areas wards have split and formed their own mini Parish Councils. There is nothing to stop a recognised area becoming a parish. TL is addressing the Bexhill Town Forum in these issues.

TL finished saying that Parish Councils who successfully engage with the community have the following;

* Resolute Councillors
* Strong Leadership
* Well Trained and Competent Clerks

Neighbourhood Plans were the main area of discussion for the second group. TL confirmed that a Neighbourhood Plan could be very useful as the last line in defence against planning appeals. Where District Councils have got out of date Core Strategy documents or poor quality planning policies appeal can be pushed through more easily. A good NP would demonstrate clear community led resistance.

Confirmed that Quality Councils would not go by the way side, they are to remain as a quality assurance mark. Power of Competence is at all levels Parish / District / County and is the enabling legislation.

Question over who is going to create NP and the funding of the work was discussed, it was seen as very time consuming and expensive. How can you expect Parish Cllrs to take on this work?

TL advised over the funding available, £20,000 per parish or cluster of parishes forming a NP. The next trench will potentially have the funding going direct to Parish Councils and not the to District Council to administer. This funding would enable Parish Councils to pay for community engagement and professionals to complete the plans. The consultation methods do not have to be in traditional methods. Important to consult with the community, they can see what the options are and what the potential future costs could be.

Concerns raised that parish and village residents will not want change, again a statement with no solutions presented by the group.

Discussions were had about clustering, is there any evidence of this working well in other areas. TL advised that being grouped together creating capacity was a much easier option, sharing skills, rather than project work across multiple areas.

Area committees were raised; do we look towards the larger Parish and Town councils with larger infrastructure within the organisations to take the lead?

Rother Association of Local Councils, can they play a more active role, making it different to the organisation it currently is, to take on the challenges?

TL agreed that these were interesting areas to take forward.

Right to Bid? Discussion over the opportunities this would provide. Will this inflate the prices of community assets if they are registered? Will it encourage these assets onto the open market whereas before they would have not been considered for sale?

With “right to buy” the driver to proceed should be the community need. The lead may not need to be the Parish Council but another local community group.

**Theme in detail: Localism and Planning**

Tim Hickling opened with the key theme of Neighbourhood planning and Localism.

Several Town and Parish Councillor expressed general support for the current system although imperfect allowed them to comment on applications.

A Bexhill Councillor noted Bexhill would have to organise itself into a neighbourhood forum if the community wanted to proceed with a neighbourhood plan.

There was general support for greater involvement in the planning process as local people do not feel empowered when it came to planning.

Several contributors spoke about a lack of opportunity for communities to get involved in the long term planning of their communities.

Ticehurst states local communities can provide valuable local knowledge for officers when developing plans and strategies especially work on appropriate sites for development.

Battle Town Council commented the work between the district and town council in developing the Battle Town Study for the Core Strategy was a positive experience and should be the way forward.

The process involved in implementing Neighbourhood Planning and Neighbourhood Development Orders was discussed. Officers provided some clarity. Local people can choose to draw up either a plan or a development order or both but must follow some ground rules:

* They must be generally be in line with local and national planning policies
* They must be in line with other laws
* If the local planning authority says that an area needs to grow, then communities cannot use neighbourhood planning to block the building of new homes and businesses.
* They can, however, use neighbourhood planning to influence the type, design, location and mix of new development.

There was concern about the lack of skills at a Parish and Town Council level in developing neighbourhood planning. Would there be help to develop the skills base?

Officers confirmed there would be an obligation to assist in the preparation of neighbourhood plans and procedurally the parish/town council would have to undertake an independent check (not necessarily by a PINS inspector) followed by a community referendum where it must secure majority support.

In a time of severe cuts across the public sector and resources are limited. Would there be the capacity to develop a neighbourhood plan for all the parishes and town councils?

Where the funding came from to develop neighbourhood planning was a concern among several contributors.

Officers confirmed there would be some money from central government to facilitate neighbourhood planning but could not confirm how it would distributed or how much would be available.

It was confirmed that 20K was given to each DCLG Neighbourhood Planning frontrunners to develop their plans.

A number of contributors stated their Parishes are relatively small organisations and currently have few resources to deal with neighbourhood planning or Community Right to Bid.

Community Right to Challenge was discussed and some contributors were interested in providing some services taking control away from the district or county.

It was noted by some contributors that a robust financial business plan would have to be in place but the discussion centred on:

* Would there be help for the parishes in delivering services
* If after a couple of years the parish or town council run into difficulties in providing the service and had to stop providing it – who would pick up the running of the service? Would it be the district council especially in a time of difficult financial climate?
* Who organises and pays for the community referendum?

The parishes and town councils would have to take a professional approach to Consultation and adhere to Regulations. A failure to do so could possibly lead to a legal challenge and cost liability on the parishes/town councils.

The timetable for implementation of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) was raised by some contributors. Officers confirmed there has been considerable joint working in East Sussex already to implement CIL demonstrating a Duty to Co-operate between public bodies. Officers also confirmed there had been DCLG national consultation on CIL which ended before Christmas and Rother supported the principle that CIL receipts raised in individual parishes and town council areas, a proportion should be returned to those communities. Officers commented discussions at a national and local level generally centred on between 5-10% of CIL receipts raised in particular areas would be returned to those communities. The outcome of the national consultation would be announced in the Spring 2012. Officers confirmed they would be visiting parishes and town councils in the Spring to move forward with the Site Allocations DPD. It would involve working together with individual parishes and town councils to review the sustainable growth options.

**Theme in detail: Localism and Housing**

**> Is Rother likely to be impacted by the predicted relocation of housing benefit claimants from high-rent areas (e.g. London boroughs)?**

Yes. Councils have a duty to vulnerable residents made homeless through no fault of their own, to provide them with accommodation - this is likely to be through encouraging them to move to areas where rents are cheaper. Changes to housing benefit - a cap on the maximum amount available, and changes so the benefit only pays for the number of bedrooms required by the family - are likely to push people out of high-rent areas such as London.

There are other areas in the South East where rents are cheaper than in Rother and which are therefore more likely to be affected (e.g. Hastings, Thanet, Margate) but an impact in Rother cannot be ruled out.

**> Can London boroughs 'repatriate' without asking RDC?**

Yes! - the 'receiving' authority has no say.

**> Will there be a benefit cap for large families?**

Yes - housing benefit will pay for a maximum of four bedrooms.

**> Does the originating council pay for the housing?**

No - any housing benefit for the relocated people must be paid by the receiving authority.

**> What about the cost of the extra service demand resulting from these relocated people?**

There are currently no plans for any extra money from central government to cover these costs. If the relocated people become homeless again within two years they are referred back to the originating authority, but that authority may simply rehouse them in the same area or elsewhere.

**> Does homelessness resulting from drug and/or alcohol abuse count as voluntary homelessness?**

Not in all cases; drug/alcohol abuse may be diagnosed alongside mental health issues, which would qualify as involuntary homelessness. RDC refers these cases to a medical examiner for expert diagnosis.

**> Could local affordable housing (i.e. at the parish level) be affected by these people being rehoused there?**

No. Local affordable housing delivered via the exceptions site process can be reserved for people with local connections under the section 106 agreements made when they were built. The parish then gets to decide who is eligible for the housing.

**> But this doesn't protect existing housing?**

Not currently, but RDC's housing allocations policy is being reviewed with a view to requiring a 5-year local connection before a person becomes eligible for affordable housing. Our homelessness duty can still be discharged through the use of private rented accommodation.

**> What about the changes to tenancies?**

The Localism Act introduces flexible tenancies, where affordable housing can be offered for a fixed term. Rother's Housing Associations are currently planning to offer 5-year tenancies, with a review undertaken six months before the end of the tenancy to assess whether the tenant still requires affordable housing, and if so whether the housing allocated is still suitable for their needs. This is not a new idea - Rother's Housing Associations currently operate a one-year introductory tenancy - and it is designed to encourage better use of family-sized homes and the use of affordable housing as a short-term solution.

There are also changes to rents in the pipeline - HAs can now charge up to 80% of market rent for affordable housing (termed 'affordable rent'). Affordable rents can apply to some relets as well as to new tenancies.

These changes will make affordable housing more expensive in order to meet gaps in capital funding - central grants for building new affordable homes are being reduced - and will result in different social rents being offered depending on local conditions, etc.

They may also change demand patterns as people downsize from larger properties to smaller ones; this may add to existing housing pressures & deficits. This may mean a move towards more provision through shared ownership, homebuy schemes, etc. which are usually easier to provide.

In essence, the changes mark a move from council housing for life to housing by need.

**> Will any of these changes be retrospective, i.e. will current lifetime tenancies be affected?**

No, but tenancy swap schemes are being encouraged to allow existing tenants to swap their tenancies with others if their housing is no longer suitable to their needs. Some local schemes exist already but a national scheme is being set up. Housing Associations should advise their tenants accordingly.

**> If there is no appropriate affordable housing available for tenants being 'unhoused' as a result of tenancy reviews, can they still be removed?**

Yes. The Housing Association has a duty to rehouse them but the tenant could end up coming to RDC for rehousing.

**> How do we find out how many tenants, affordable homes, etc. there are in our parish?**

County have figures available, RDC can also provide them. The draft housing strategy lays out where housing is, what numbers are in each parish and what type of tenure.

**> Will parish councils be called on to confirm local connections?**

As a last resort, i.e. only if a claimed local connection cannot be confirmed any other way (electoral roll, council tax records, etc.) In this case district councillors will be informed and can consult with parishes to verify.

**Theme in detail: Localism and Community action**

Localism would create resource problems, particularly for smaller parishes that are not equipped with the same powers and experience of Town Councils. There is a perception that devolution is an opt-out by the District Council. Localism will be a challenge for communities that are unused to making decisions for themselves in coping with change and challenges. Responsibility and decision making – who will assume this and who will have the experience and professionalism to make decisions?

Costs – who will pay and how can costs be sustained? – if communities have to pay for services then the less well-off will be marginalised. There may be lots of enthusiasm now but how can this be sustained in 10 years’ time?

There is a problem with double taxation e.g. both Parish and District Councils charging/paying for same services.

In Bexhill the feeling is that there is a small percentage of people eager to push ahead with the Localism Act but in general residents don’t care who runs services as long as they are managed efficiently and delivered on time e.g. bin collections and street/verge cleaning etc.

Community hubs – getting people involved in community projects and working together through volunteering (unemployed and university students) and training is becoming a popular way of uniting communities and enabling them to make decisions together.

In Battle a lot of work has been undertaken by volunteers to maintain public gardens around the town but although these are easy types of projects to manage there are others that are more challenging e.g. services undertaken by the County.

Planning issues – there is a perception that allowing Parish Councils to do their own planning is a red herring.

Devolution of public car parks and toilets – these would be the only services that Parish Councils might be able to operate. Other services that the District Council provides such as environmental and housing services would not be feasible.

County Council sub-contracting – if the District Council decides to follow suit, then professionalism will be an essential requirement for those who take on these services or else they will cease to exist.

Youth Services – there is no longer a proper youth service in Rother as there is no money elsewhere to cover the costs.

Rother is getting poorer – 80% of those living in poverty don’t actually live in Wards of deprivation.

Bexhill Town Council – there would be potential for Parish Councils if Bexhill had its own Town Council. Although there is no governing force for Bexhill, the Localism Bill provides an opportunity for this to happen. **Note**: People in Bexhill are less concerned about who does what – the provision and delivery of services paid for through Council Tax are more essential.

Need for caution in terms of opportunity wish-lists – opportunities often turn out to be threats and success will depend on the strongest who have external support from the local authority when they need it. **Note**: The District Council should not be given the opportunity to wash their hands of support to their communities.

Devolution of services might be better managed through the existing constitutional Town Councils and larger Parishes as they have the advantage of expertise and professionalism compared to smaller parishes that would not have the capacity to deliver.

Mostly, it is the same people who volunteer and have the confidence to put themselves forward. How can communities ensure which individual is right for the job?

Local Action Plans – more work needs to be done in order to mould local needs through existing community assets. Finding people who can do this work and the resources for this will be a massive challenge.

Capabilities – many organisations have a tradition of doing things in a certain way and understand management roles. The challenge will be for those who do not have this expertise. How can this be prevented and dealt with?

Sustainable services – communities who want to retain existing services such as swimming pools, libraries etc or operate new facilities will need to pay for these themselves. This will only lead to an increase in inequalities.

Expertise – volunteers need expertise in running a service to the public. Who will provide this? There is a risk that if the Town Councils fail to take over some services such as community/youth centres that these may become too big for the community to handle itself. **Note**: People today have to work longer and those of a more mature age who are willing to volunteer can only do so for a limited period of time. There is little enthusiasm from younger generations who do not wish to do unpaid work.

Paying for services – the prospect of having to pay for services will mean that many people will struggle such as those in respite care. Already the County Council is carrying out means testing for those in receivership of this type of care.

Community auditing – there are ways of meeting challenges before they happen such as the community getting together through local faith or caring groups to hold discussions at the local village hall/pub. **Note**: Who will act as mediator for those who are housebound and cannot get out and about?

Adapting to change – Localism will bring about a whole new way of working but at the moment nobody is sure about how this can be achieved. Learning how to do things differently and finding new ways to acquire funding will be one of the biggest challenges.

Strength in working together – communities can work together by identifying priorities and taking responsibility (e.g. Local Action Plans) with the help of leadership from local Parish and District Councillors.

There was a feeling that the act in principle sounds promising, but the reality is likely to be one of disappointment.

**Challenges**

Parish Councils will still need support that will be required for the Neighbourhood Planning process. Cost? Has RDC got funding/capacity?

Could this delay the LDF process? How will local referendums be funded?

Providing clarity about the level of detail when submitting Neighbourhood Plans. Full plans or a wish list? Using scarce funds for preparing plans that may not lead to anything.

Need to convey that localism is about more than planning and housing.

Communities may be put off engaging if they see that the process is not working.

How will accountability work? More understanding needed.

Will be difficult for Parish Councils to engage communities with current resourcing levels.

How do we avoid village pubs being shut. Concern expressed that pubs sometimes purchased for use as a private house, situation in which it is likely to be worth more.

**Opportunities**

Communities could become more sustainable by having more houses/residents.

Should increase transparency in the planning process.

Improve the demand for knowledge arising from residents (also a challenge, how will this be managed?) thus empowering them.

Look at models in which introducing local panels can work e.g. Police Panels to support understanding.

An area based approach (Town Councils maybe?) could be more sustainable and effective in moving forward. 3 areas suggested for an area based approach, Rye, Battle and Bexhill.

Could support empowering young people to engage more.

Could make RDC look at its role and be more responsive. Improved communication needed by the Council.

Mapping of community assets could identify opportunities to better use currently under used resources such as sports pavilions. Could also support identification of innovative approaches such as Etchingham Railway Station bistro.

Look at joining up businesses in single use facilities e.g. pubs and butchers.

Opportunities for superfast broadband maybe?

We discussed on our table the possibility of producing some case studies, e.g. potential opportunities or challenges that the localism act offers (e.g. closure of the Butchers shop in Ticehurst)

Concerns about what services we can actually take on.

West Sussex for example funded a youth officer- AIRS- Parish council has stepped in to provide services and it is chargeable.

A number of parish’s join together to provide services, spread the cost i.e 5 parishes, 1 day a week.

RALC- identify common need across parishes to serve more than one area.

Toilet/Tourism- keep it running throughout the year, check and clean every day to deliver services.

Icklesham neighbourhood groups.

Bexhill has difficulties with no structure- Town Council- it is an opportunity to work as a blank sheet.

Agree on what to focus on i.e. localise Youth services

Housing, public conveniences

You can choose what bits to do.

Neighbourhood planning

Affordable housing for younger people

Keeping services in the village re newsagent- community interest?

Community hub- old school Rye – working with agencies, benefits for residents to access services- using local people to operate these businesses.

People aren’t sure what services ESCC provide.

What pieces of land do ESCC own?

Car parking – work with community safety and agencies- i.e. for example Northiam car park was discussed, it is currently a free car park and Northiam are unlikely to want to look after it or take responsibility. If parking fees were imposed residents would park on the highway causing problems.

Creating HUB- Youth hub

Community buy in services. i.e. Youth groups/provisions.

**Challenges**

Smaller parish hasn’t got the skills, money for skills?, share multi community service.

Takes coordination, no capacity

Parish clerks, whose going to do this. Limited time and resources available.

ICIC- Learning opportunities

Services- where does the money come from to so this?

Could the Precept go up to compensate?

Smaller organisations find it difficult to get funding

CIC- Community interest group.

How does community identify needs- through action plan.

What are statutory services?

The ability to challenge decisions

Select the services available

Procurement i.e refuse could we share even more services than we already do?

Need to realistic about something sustainable- limited people to take forward challenges.

Small groups can bid for funds not available to larger groups.

Resources- whose going to volunteer

Skills/ expertise

Concern was raised on the time aspect of the Localism Act; there was an assumption that people will have time to take on projects when they already lead busy lives and work long hours etc.

Concern expressed on where the resources would come to manage projects undertaken in the long term i.e. Parish Councils may have to employ people to run services that were devolved.

There were constraints on District and County Councils to put up tax but no constraints on Parish or Town Councils to raise their precepts. This would enable services to be delivered to areas that the local residents wanted and were willing to pay for.

Devolvement of some services would not produce much of an achievement or any cost saving.

Concern expressed on where the expertise on running services would come from should they be devolved.

If a service was devolved the consistency of service would need to be considered. Volunteer(s) could not be relied on as peoples’ circumstances change; they could move house, become unwell etc..

If the RDC offered the freehold to a community facility rather than a lease; devolvement could potentially be a more attractive offering. Freeholds would enable Parish Councils to apply for grants and loans; leaseholds did not; we need to recognise that these assets were tax payers assets; the issue of sovereignty needed to be addressed.

The ‘Community Right to Build’ part of the Act would help communities deliver their desires on areas such as affordable housing.

Pressure groups led by one strong individual had the potential to derail Parish Councils work on neighbourhood plans. This had occurred in the past and the Act did not deter this kind of situation.

The neighbourhood plan also gave communities the option to address employment, however it was recognised that good transport links were also required.

If affordable housing was delivered in villages it would help keep young people and families in villages; building smaller properties to free up family houses were in desperate need in some areas.

The act could possibly lead to more affordable housing it was believed that the existing mechanisms were not working properly at the moment and that the Act could help communities to achieve their affordable housing aspirations.

Neighbourhood plans would enable the community to highlight how they want their neighbourhood to develop and dictate what facilities the community wanted.

Strong opposition to an idea by a few people could force a Parish Council to change its mind.

The perceived need of a Town Council for Bexhill and the reality needed to be tested. If a Town Council was formed; what would it resolve?

RDC needed to communicate more effectively with villages and Town Councils

There was a danger that villages and Town Councils would want to Cherry pick services.

Freeholds to devolved services could potentially be a more attractive proposition; especially if there was a piece of land attached with it that the Parish or Town council could enhance to add value to the area.

Devolution of Services could also be about controlling service and how it’s delivered, i.e. getting the type of service the community wanted rather than just getting the best price.

If a provider of a devolved service went bankrupt the service would fail and cease. RDC would not pick it up.

RDC would look to devolve discretionary services.

RDC wanted to manage the devolvement of services; they did not want to just stop offering certain services.

The running of referendums for neighbourhood plans was a big issue; this would be very costly, who would fund this cost?

Hiring staff to oversee devolved services could be an issue for Parish Councils and would need to be included in any business plan.

Concern was raised as to where Parish Councils would get the expertise from for setting up the acquisition of premises to turn into a community facility.

Community facilities, such as Village Halls were a good example of how these types of facilities could be run.

1. **Plenary Session**

**Facilitator – Derek Stevens, CEO Rother District Council**

**Q1 What constitutes as an excessive rise in Council Tax that would require a referendum?**

A For RDC any increase of 3.5% and over – town and parishes could increase their precepts by any amount.

**Q2 CPRE / NALC publication highlighted as a good read. Concerns over Neighbourhood Planning if there was no RDC money / resources to support this work; Is there any possibility that one of the towns or parishes across RDC could offer to be a 2nd tranche of pilots and receive funding?**

A 250 copies of booklet are available from TL’s office. The Government has set aside £15m for this process however there has been no announcement for “new” money to support the Planning work – Local Planning Authorities will pay, according to the legislation. 4th tranche of pilots will be launched in March – up to individual towns and parishes to request RDC to make application. Not sure whether the funding is provided direct to the Town / Parish or held by the District Council – clarification on this point is awaited;

**Q3 Right to Bid – can community groups come up with a suggested valuation for a community asset agreed between vendor / purchaser?**

A Much of the detail is still awaited – but would suspect that it would be unlikely to deviate away from current practice in terms of District Valuer input. Especially if Community Groups request assistance from District Councils in terms of their borrowing power to provide additional funding.

**Q4 Do groups within the community that have formed a corporate identity to progress initiatives under the Localism Act then have to go through their local town or parish council?**

A No. Such groups will be able to come direct to District / County Councils as appropriate. There is no requirement for the Town / Parish to be involved.

**Q5 It is pleasing that RDC is being so open and transparent with this Localism Agenda thus far – but have heard nothing from ESCC? What are they doing? What is the scope to work with them?**

A Good point – not only for towns and parishes but for the District Council to consider which services it could take over from ESCC and deliver better, locally.

It was noted that ESCC were undertaking service reviews across all services to see what the future options were and needed more time to consider these matter themselves, rather than sharing thoughts from the outset.