

# SOUTH EAST ENGLAND COUNCILS BRIEFING ON LOCALISM BILL – JUNE 2011



- 1 The needs and aspirations of local communities are at the heart of local government's work. South East England Councils supports the principle of devolving responsibility and delivery to the most local level practicable. **SEEC supports the principle of localism and believes communities are best served when accountable, elected local government is entrusted with powers, freedoms and flexibility to respond to their needs effectively and efficiently.**
  
- 2 **SEEC is supportive of specific aspects of the Localism Bill but is concerned they must be introduced with as little bureaucracy as possible to free local government to deliver for its communities in the most cost effective way. We support:**
  - A general power of competence for local authorities.
  - The ability to grant business rate discounts.
  - Abolition of standards boards.
  - Abolition of regional planning and top down housing targets.
  - Involving communities in planning but without the complexity and conflict that will be created by neighbourhood planning proposals.
  
- 3 **We are, however, concerned that a number of aspects of the Localism Bill run counter to the principles of 'good localism' set out in paragraph 1.** These will have unintended consequences – for example creating delays and blockages in decision making and delivery, as well as increasing costs and hindering existing good practice by introducing 140+ restrictive central controls.
  
- 4 **We ask that central government rolls back its control on a number of issues proposed in the Bill and allows local government to step up to the mark for the benefit of all in our communities.**
  
- 5 The following three areas of the Bill require particular attention, and we ask those discussing the Bill to consider removing or amending them:
  - i. **Local referendums**
    - Proposals for referendums would be costly, non-binding and could be called by a very small number of people who may use them to delay actions that would support wider community needs. We ask they are removed from the Bill - good community involvement is already being achieved at lower cost through effective consultation and engagement.
    - The electorate rightly demonstrates the acceptability of council tax and council performance through the ballot box at local election time. The Bill's proposals for Council Tax referendums will be costly and bureaucratic. They are unnecessary and should be removed. Also, power for the Secretary of State to set council tax caps is contrary to the principles of localism.
  
  - ii. **Neighbourhood planning**
    - Local authorities already engage with communities to jointly shape the future of local areas, with effective, efficient and inclusive approaches such as parish

plans. Neighbourhood Plan proposals in the Bill should be removed as they will add complexity, costs for supporting local groups, and bring tension about growth levels between different neighbourhoods within the same community. Variability in the quality and capacity of neighbourhood groups will give an uneven approach. It is cheaper and simpler to adapt the current LDF and parish plan/other existing consensual local community planning systems.

### iii. Increased bureaucracy for local government

- New rules on maintaining lists of assets of community value, community right to challenge procurement and neighbourhood planning will all increase administrative burdens on councils and should be removed from the Bill. Local government could make new systems work much more simply by applying existing good practice and effective use of the proposed general power of competence.

**6 SEEC also supports the LGA's position that it is wrong to pass European Fines to local government.** Allowing Ministers to force councils to pay parts of fines imposed on the government by the EU would be unfair and unconstitutional, as councils may have no responsibility for fines levied. This is unworkable and will lead to long, costly legal battles to decide who is liable.

### 7 In conclusion

- SEEC supports the principle of localism delivered through elected local government working effectively with local communities.
- However the bureaucracy and central control inherent in the Bill would have the unintended consequence of inhibiting the ability to deliver community needs and must be addressed.

## South East England Councils June 2011

*South East England Councils (SEEC) promotes the views and interests of all tiers of local government across the South East, who together represent more than eight million residents. SEEC is a voluntary body, funded by member council subscriptions, and carries a unique mandate as the single democratic voice of the South East.*

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