

# David Moore: Localism - will it be an expensive damp squib?



**W**hen the Government announced its plans for a Decentralisation and Localism Bill on May 25, 2010, the promise was that, 'a Bill will be introduced to devolve greater powers to councils and neighbourhoods and give local communities control over housing and planning decisions'.

The Localism Act now exists so it's time to see what we've got and how much control we'll have. The first thing that we need to do is to define what we wish to be our neighbourhood. We might decide to use existing organisations for this purpose



Localism could prove costly for Chancellor George Osborne

or a group of people may decide to set up its own group. Whatever we do, we'll need a constitution.

The local authority will decide whether or not each group meets the right standards with sensible objectives and,

if it does, it can be approved as a Neighbourhood Forum. Already, the concept of local democracy starts to diminish.

The next step is to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan. This has to accept the local plan, which has been produced by local

authorities such as Horsham District Council. Local councils will set the number of homes to be built in each district and the location of those homes.

The Neighbourhood Plan cannot object to the number of new homes to be built or their location but it can ask for even more new homes to be built in its area!

The Neighbourhood Plan then has to be checked by an independent examiner and changes may be enforced on the plan. Once a plan has been approved, it will be put to a local referendum for acceptance or rejection.

So what have we got? We've got a system, which appears to offer us control over our own neighbourhoods but actually gives us very little.

It presents local authorities with a nightmare scenario and creates yet another level of bureaucracy for what appears to be no useful purpose. It also

has cost implications, which are currently unquantified.

The Government has promised to make £50m available to help local authorities support neighbourhood planning but how this will be used and what financial limits will be imposed is unknown?

So what's going to happen next? The first problem is going to be engagement with the public at large. Getting people to vote in local elections is difficult enough, so what enthusiasm is there likely to be for any of us to get involved in localism? How are the neighbourhood groups, which must comprise a minimum of 21 people, going to be formed and how are they going to communicate with their communities?

The danger is that we are all suffering from consultation fatigue so yet another consultation process is likely to be greeted with disinterest.

The success or failure of neighbourhood planning will unfold over time but it would be sensible to get one neighbourhood group up and running first so that people can understand the difficulties involved and learn from both the successes and failures.

It's going to be interesting to review localism in its current form in a few years' time and decide whether or not it's been worth the effort. Judgement is reserved.

*The Horsham Society is concerned about the past, present and future of the town. It seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces. Membership of the Horsham Society is open to anyone, who shares these concerns. For more information, visit our website [www.horshamsociety.org](http://www.horshamsociety.org) or telephone 01403 261640.*