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# Decentralisation and Empowerment under the Coalition Government: An Empirical Study of Local Councils in London

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☞ keywords to be inserted by the indexer

## Abstract

*The Big Society policy and the Coalition's localism agenda set out objectives regarding the decentralisation of power and the empowerment of local people, with the aim that previous governments' centralism and top-down bureaucracy could become a thing of the past. This article presents qualitative empirical data, obtained from semi-structured interviews in five London Borough Councils, and explores the extent to which the 2010–2015 Government achieved these aims, with a particular look at planning reform and policy. It considers that, in part due to severe financial cuts and persisting centralised bureaucracy, efforts to decentralise have not been successful; whilst local people, though often empowered, tend to get involved regardless or even in spite of central government activity. Following the 2015 General Election and the forming of a new Government, this article presents the case for a changed attitude towards local government; one founded on greater freedom, less bureaucracy and increased trust in local authorities.*

## The Coalition's Localism Agenda and the Big Society

When the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats entered government in 2010, they immediately set out an agreed agenda for local governmental and democratic reform, stating that:

“The Government believes ... it is time for a fundamental shift of power from Westminster to people. We will promote decentralisation and democratic engagement, and ... end the era of top-down government by giving new powers to local councils, communities, neighbourhoods and individuals.”<sup>1</sup>

The Coalition Agreement, which set out this agenda, provided a foundation for the two-party government, representing consensus on a number of policies. Though there were also inevitable compromises,<sup>2</sup> the substance of the Agreement sought to go beyond the political differences and build upon “common ground” shared by the two parties.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, at the heart of the document was a shared “conviction that the days of big government are over; [and] that centralisation and top-down control have proved a failure”.<sup>4</sup> Elaborating on this, Cameron and Clegg noted a shared belief “that the time has come to disperse power more widely in Britain”, and a joint “ambition to distribute power and opportunity to people rather than hoarding authority within government”.<sup>5</sup> Reflecting this, for example, the Agreement promised to:

<sup>1</sup> HM Government, *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government* (London: Cabinet Office, 2010), p. 11 at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/78977/coalition\\_programme\\_for\\_government.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/78977/coalition_programme_for_government.pdf) [Accessed June 19, 2015].

<sup>2</sup> See T. Quinn, J. Bara and J. Bartle, “The UK Coalition Agreement of 2010: Who Won?” (2011) 21(2) *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 295.

<sup>3</sup> HM Government, *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government* (London: Cabinet Office, 2010), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> HM Government, *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government* (London: Cabinet Office, 2010), p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> HM Government, *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government* (London: Cabinet Office, 2010), p. 7.

“return decision-making powers on housing and planning to local councils ... [pledging] radically [to] reform the planning system to give neighbourhoods far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which their inhabitants live.”<sup>6</sup>

Echoing aspects of the Conservatives’ Big Society policy, this desire to decentralise and empower went on to form a key part of the Government’s localism agenda, with the Department for Communities and Local Government (“DCLG”) later acknowledging that:

“The best contribution that central government can make is to devolve power, money and knowledge to those best placed to find the best solutions to local needs ... The Coalition is ... committed to *decentralisation*, which is the biggest thing that government can do to build the Big Society.”<sup>7</sup>

This commitment has borne fruit. The Localism Act 2011, which was at the “backbone of the Big Society”,<sup>8</sup> along with accompanying policies, introduced a range of new powers for local authorities and communities, enabling them to shape their local areas, as this article will go on to discuss. This article does not offer a conceptual analysis of these provisions and policies; that has already been done.<sup>9</sup> Instead, it presents findings from an empirical study, carried out in five London Boroughs, exploring the extent to which the aims of decentralisation and empowerment are perceived as having been successfully met by local councillors, with a particular focus on local planning.

The article considers decentralisation and empowerment in turn, focusing on issues raised in the interviews such as the effect of austerity measures, concern for centralised bureaucracy and patterns of citizen involvement. Following this, it explores how these issues might be tackled and objectives of decentralisation and empowerment more successfully met in the future. Throughout these sections is an underlying emphasis on planning policy and reform; that being identified by a number of the councillors as an area relevant to these discussions. First, however, it is necessary to explain the methodology underpinning this empirical research.

## Methodology

A qualitative empirical study facilitated enquiry into the manner in which recent reform and policy has impacted on local councils. As a pilot study, the scope of the research was particularly narrow. Seven semi-structured interviews were carried out in five London Borough Councils—Hackney, Islington, Kensington and Chelsea, Richmond and Sutton. These enabled councillors to respond to specific questions and provided scope for further discussion and enquiry into particular issues.<sup>10</sup> The process was informal and conversational, with councillors’ “experiences ... perceptions, motives and accounts” informing the discussions.<sup>11</sup> As Mason explains:

“The style is conversational, flexible and fluid, and the purpose is achieved through active engagement by interviewer and interviewee around relevant issues, topics and experiences during the interview itself.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> HM Government, *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government* (London: Cabinet Office, 2010), p.11.

<sup>7</sup> DCLG, *Decentralisation and the Localism Bill: An essential guide* (London: DCLG, 2010), p.2 at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/5951/1793908.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/5951/1793908.pdf) [Accessed June 19, 2015].

<sup>8</sup> V. Lowndes and L. Pratchett, “Local Governance under the Coalition Government: Austerity, Localism and the ‘Big Society’” (2012) 38(1) *Local Government Studies* 21, 30–31.

<sup>9</sup> See G. Jones and J. Stewart, “Local Government: the past, the present and the future” (2012) 27(4) *Public Administration* 346 and J. Stanton, “The Big Society and community development: Neighbourhood planning under the Localism Act” (2014) 16(4) *Environmental Law Review* 262.

<sup>10</sup> T May, *Social Research: Issues, methods and process*, 4th edn (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2011), p.134.

<sup>11</sup> K. Gerson and R. Horowitz, “Observation and Interviewing: Options and Choices in Qualitative Research” in T. May (ed), *Qualitative Research in Action* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), p.199 at p.221.

<sup>12</sup> J. Mason, “Qualitative Interviewing: Asking, Listening and Interpreting” in T. May (ed), *Qualitative Research in Action* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), p.225.

Participants were recruited on the basis of convenience sampling.<sup>13</sup> All councillors in the five London Borough Councils were invited to take part in the project, with the hope that two or three from each Borough would be interviewed. In the event, however, only one or two councillors came forward from each borough, giving a total of seven participants. The findings must therefore be read with caution in view of this low take-up. As Bryman notes, issues of whether the number of participants is representative of the wider group is problematic, though even interviewing just seven councillors presents a valuable opportunity to investigate the implementation of the Coalition's policies and reforms, and is here regarded as sufficient to enable preliminary analysis.<sup>14</sup>

The project was explained to participating councillors and each was provided with an Information Sheet. This set out, inter alia, the purpose and nature of the study, the researcher's details, the rights as regards individuals' participation, the anonymity afforded participants and the plans regarding dissemination.<sup>15</sup> The informed consent of participants was obtained prior to each interview, and councillors were assured that their identity would be protected and that in the publication of the project's findings, they would simply be referred to as "a councillor in X Borough Council".<sup>16</sup> Where quoted, the interviews are cited only by number.

The 7 interviews lasted between 18 and 49 minutes and were "organised around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue".<sup>17</sup> All the interviews were recorded with the consent of the councillors and transcribed anonymously. The transcriptions were then analysed using grounded theory. Grounded theory is that which derives from "data systematically obtained from social research".<sup>18</sup> In this context, this means that the arguments and conclusions, developed throughout this article, are derived from or grounded in the findings from the interviews.<sup>19</sup> Existing literature—both academic and governmental—also adds to the context of the interviews and substantiates many of the discussions and considerations now explored.

## Decentralisation to local authorities

Decentralisation means taking power from the centre and distributing it at a more localised level. Smith and Wistrich note that "[d]ecentralisation in the United Kingdom is usually referred to as 'devolution'", going on to state that "any devolution of political power 'involves the dispersal of power from a superior to an inferior political authority'".<sup>20</sup> It is generally regarded as "a good thing", primarily due to the manner in which it seeks to promote local democracy. As Newman states, decentralisation "is usually promoted in order to foster more active citizenship, improve ... accountability and responsiveness ... and provide new pathways for participation and partnership".<sup>21</sup> With regards to decentralisation, the interviews enquired as to the effectiveness with which the government's policies and reforms have been implemented.

The Coalition's push for decentralisation was justified by an apparent need to correct the "centralist creep of decades", replacing "it with local control".<sup>22</sup> As Nick Clegg claims:

<sup>13</sup> See A. Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 4th edn (Oxford: OUP, 2012), pp.201–202.

<sup>14</sup> A. Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 4th edn (Oxford: OUP, 2012), p.201.

<sup>15</sup> See H. Arksey and P. Knight, *Interviewing for Social Scientists* (London: Sage Publications, 1999), pp.129–130.

<sup>16</sup> H. Arksey and P. Knight, *Interviewing for Social Scientists* (London: Sage Publications, 1999), pp.129, 132–135.

<sup>17</sup> B. DiCicco-Bloom and B. F. Crabtree, "The qualitative research interview" (2006) 40 *Medical Education* 314, 315.

<sup>18</sup> B. Glaser and A. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967), p.2.

<sup>19</sup> See L. Lingard, M. Albert and W. Levinson, "Grounded theory, mixed methods and action research" (2008) 337 *British Medical Journal* 567.

<sup>20</sup> D. M. Smith and E. Wistrich, *Devolution and Localism in England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp.4–5; citing V. Bogdanor, *Devolution* (Oxford: OUP, 1979), p.2.

<sup>21</sup> I. Newman, *Reclaiming Local Democracy: A progressive future for local government* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2014), p.113; citing V. Lowndes, "Decentralisation: the potential and the pitfalls" (1992) 18(4) *Local Government Policy Making* 53, 60, and H. Sullivan and J. Howard, "Below the LSP: issues paper, national evaluation of LSPs" (London: ODPM, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> *Hansard*, HC Deb. Vol.521, col.558, January 17, 2011.

“[r]adical decentralisation means stripping away much of the top-down bureaucracy that previous governments have put in the way of frontline public services and civil society.”<sup>23</sup>

With this in mind, various reforms have been introduced to bring about this devolution, particularly with regards to local planning. The Localism Act 2011, for instance, sets out a number of community rights, giving localities the opportunities to take over local services and shape local areas, and introduces changes to neighbourhood planning, giving neighbourhoods the power to initiate and determine the nature of local developments.<sup>24</sup>

These statutory reforms have also been accompanied by a number of promises relating to decentralisation. Explaining the Big Society in a speech in July 2010, David Cameron acknowledged that:

“[w]e must push power away from central government to local government—and we shouldn’t stop there. We should drive it down even further ... to communities, to neighbourhoods and individuals.”<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, providing guidance on the Localism Bill, Nick Clegg stated that:

“instead of taking more power for the Government, this Bill will give power away ... [It] marks the beginning of a power shift away from central government to the people, families and communities of Britain.”<sup>26</sup>

Despite these provisions, policies and promises, however, the vision of decentralisation has not been fully realised. When asked, in simple terms, whether the Coalition had brought about the decentralisation of power, nearly all the local councillors interviewed offered a resounding “No”. In Islington, for example, a councillor stated:

“I think the answer has to be, no ... All oppositions talk about decentralising and making things more local ... all Governments, almost regardless of party labels, once they’re in power and they’ve got their feet behind the desk in Whitehall, seem to think that they know best, and that they can tell everyone else how things should be run.”<sup>27</sup>

Echoing this, a councillor in Hackney noted that “there is a lot of rhetoric around decentralisation and localism ... but I don’t think this Government really has pushed power down”.<sup>28</sup> Similar views were also discussed in Sutton, Richmond, and Kensington and Chelsea.<sup>29</sup>

The issue, it seems, is not so much with the lack of decentralising provisions, but with the broader context within which these provisions are set. Decentralisation is about so much more than passing statutory provisions empowering a local council to do X, Y and Z. It is about creating an environment in which councils can make the most of powers that are bestowed upon them, free from unhelpful restrictions, and facilitating the exercise of decentralised power at the local level. This is evidently not happening as these comments serve to show and there are a number of reasons underlying this.

The most prominent of these reasons is the financial cuts that have been imposed on local authorities over the last few years as part of wider initiatives aimed at tackling austerity.

Though, following the financial crisis and period of recession, the 2010–2015 Government was always going to involve a degree of financial compromise, there is a sense that “[l]ocal government faced a

<sup>23</sup> DCLG, *Decentralisation and the Localism Bill: An essential guide* (London: DCLG, 2010), p.1.

<sup>24</sup> See, for more information: DCLG, *A plain English guide to the Localism Act* (London: DCLG, 2011) at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/5959/1896534.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/5959/1896534.pdf) [Accessed June 19, 2015]; and DCLG, *Giving people more power over what happens in their neighbourhood* (2012) at <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/giving-people-more-power-over-what-happens-in-their-neighbourhood> [Accessed June 19, 2015].

<sup>25</sup> David Cameron, *Big Society Speech*, July 19, 2010 at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/big-society-speech> [Accessed June 19, 2015].

<sup>26</sup> DCLG, *Decentralisation and the Localism Bill: An essential guide* (London: DCLG, 2010), p.1.

<sup>27</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>28</sup> Interview 5.

<sup>29</sup> See Interviews 2, 3, 4, and 7.

disproportionately high share of the cuts”.<sup>30</sup> The extent and effect of these cuts is well documented with the Local Government Association (“LGA”) explaining that, across the country:

“[c]ouncils are currently half way through a scheduled 40 per cent cut in funding from central government, causing concern that councils in many areas will not have enough money to meet all their statutory responsibilities.”<sup>31</sup>

In terms of decentralisation, the feeling is that where Central Government is introducing provisions seeking to devolve power, this is outweighed by the increasingly limited financial capabilities of local authorities. As a councillor in Hackney noted:

“even where [the government] has [pushed power down] ... they have done it at a time when they have cut 25 per cent of our funding ... we don’t feel like a place that has more freedom and flexibility.”<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, a councillor in Sutton also explained that despite the efforts made to increase local power, the cuts presented certain difficulties. They noted that:

“There’s quite a few things that have been passed down from central government to local government. For example, the council tax reduction scheme, crisis loans and grants scheme ... they’ve passed [all this] down to us ... but they’ve given us less funding. The council tax reduction scheme, council tax benefits scheme: they handed this over to local councils at 90% of what they were costing to deliver it, and now they’re restricting it even further. The crisis loans and grants scheme: they’ve passed it on to us, and now they’re going to stop funding altogether.”<sup>33</sup>

Planning and housing is a particular area of local activity that has been affected by these cuts (and the consequent lack of decentralisation). As MacDonald notes: “the planning service has suffered more than many parts of local government in the cuts”.<sup>34</sup> Connected with this, a councillor in Islington spoke of the problem from which much of inner London is suffering—namely “a lack of affordable housing”, with local authority funds generally being directed towards subsidising private landlords, rather than to tackling the wider problem.<sup>35</sup> The councillor notes:

“we would much rather have been spending money on building new homes, which would then be let out at reasonable rents, than subsidising private landlords, which has been the main thing that housing money has been spent on ... You put money into building a property, you’ve got that property as a result. You pour money into paying housing benefit to a landlord and at the end of the day you’ve still not got anything to show for it.”<sup>36</sup>

The financial constraints have caused housing problems elsewhere too. In Hackney, a councillor explained that:

“we don’t get any grant from the Government anymore to build council housing, or social housing. All that money has basically gone. So the only way we can build social housing or renew our existing stock is by using the land that we’ve got, to sell some of it in order to pay for the social housing.”<sup>37</sup>

<sup>30</sup> V. Lowndes and L. Pratchett, “Local Governance under the Coalition Government: Austerity, Localism and the ‘Big Society’” (2012) 38(1) *Local Government Studies* 21, 23.

<sup>31</sup> LGA, *Under pressure: How councils are planning for future cuts* (London: LGA, 2014), p.3 at <http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/5854661/Under+pressure.pdf/0c864f60-8e34-442a-8ed7-9037b9c59b46> [Accessed June 19, 2015].

<sup>32</sup> Interview 5.

<sup>33</sup> Interview 3.

<sup>34</sup> K MacDonald, “Making the past—delivering the future” (2014) 13 *Supp (Power to the People?)*, *Journal of Planning and Environmental Law* OP88 at OP95.

<sup>35</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>36</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>37</sup> Interview 5.

Planning, therefore, is one particular aspect of local life that has suffered as a result of the cuts and the consequent lack of decentralisation. As with other areas too, central government has attempted to endow local authorities with certain powers and has given them control over local schemes and initiatives, but due to the financial cuts simultaneously imposed, these are difficult to carry out, implement and exercise. The overall situation that this has created is illustrated by a councillor in Islington, who explained that:

“It is this curious form of both saying that you’ve got the freedom to do things ... But at the same time even more tightly controlling how you can spend the money ... You haven’t got freedom if you haven’t got the money to actually use that freedom.”<sup>38</sup>

The financial cuts, therefore, have meant that local authorities lack adequate resources to be able appropriately to use devolved powers, thus meaning that decentralisation is not happening as envisaged. The potential consequences of this are noted by Jones and Stewart who state that “[w]ithout ... financial decentralisation, centralism will prevail”.<sup>39</sup>

A further reason underlying this lack of decentralisation is the bureaucracy which encircles much of what local authorities are empowered to do. Going back to the beginning of the Coalition, at the heart of the “move from Big Government to a Big Society” and the achievement of localism was a desire to reduce levels of bureaucracy.<sup>40</sup> This was well justified. There is a tradition which suggests that “comparing local or neighbourhood government to national or regional government ... [finds] it to be less bureaucratic, more efficient, more responsive to local needs, and more democratic”.<sup>41</sup> On this basis, the Coalition identified the lifting of the “burden of bureaucracy” as a primary action for decentralisation.<sup>42</sup>

Despite this, however, the “lifting” of this bureaucracy has not been successfully achieved, and, if anything, the situation has worsened under the 2010–2015 Coalition’s reforms. This is evident in consideration of the Localism Act—legislation designed primarily to decentralise power and strip away bureaucracy. The LGA explained during the Bill’s second reading, “[t]he Localism Bill consists of 405 pages, 208 clauses, 24 schedules and at least 142 order and regulation-making powers”, something they suggest is not reflective of the “post-bureaucratic age” which has previously been promoted by the government.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, it is notable that the Localism Act “is ... [also] rich in new powers for the Secretary of State”.<sup>44</sup>

All this impacts heavily on attempts to decentralise as where government does push power down, “it comes with more bureaucracy, which just makes life harder”.<sup>45</sup> Explaining what this means in practice, a councillor in Sutton noted that Central Government:

“say they’re going to give more powers, and then its ... give with one hand take it back with the other ... our Minister for Local Government ... [tells] us to do things on [a] micro level ... it should be local decisions, they shouldn’t be anything to do with him really ... it just completely contradicts some of the localism.”<sup>46</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>39</sup> G. Jones and J. Stewart, “Local Government: the past, the present and the future” (2012) 27(4) *Public Administration* 346, 364.

<sup>40</sup> V. Lowndes and L. Pratchett, “Local Governance under the Coalition Government: Austerity, Localism and the ‘Big Society’” (2012) 38(1) *Local Government Studies* 21, 30, also see N. Clarke and A. Cochrane, “Geography and politics of localism: The localism of the United Kingdom’s coalition government” (2013) 34 *Political Geography* 10, 17.

<sup>41</sup> N. Clarke and A. Cochrane, “Geography and politics of localism: The localism of the United Kingdom’s coalition government” (2013) 34 *Political Geography* 10, 17, citing D. Corry and G. Stoker, *New Localism: Refashioning the centre-local relationship* (London: New Local Government Network, 2002), and V. Lowndes and H. Sullivan, “How low can you go? Rationales and challenges for neighbourhood governance” (2008) 86(1) *Public Administration* 53.

<sup>42</sup> DCLG, *Decentralisation and the Localism Bill: An essential guide* (London: DCLG, 2010), p.2.

<sup>43</sup> LGA, “Localism Bill 2nd Reading Debate—LGA Briefing, January 17, 2011, at [http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=aa6ae536-eaef-40aa-a3eb-d8ffc64b7c9&groupId=10180](http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=aa6ae536-eaef-40aa-a3eb-d8ffc64b7c9&groupId=10180) [Accessed June 19, 2015].

<sup>44</sup> T. Bovaird, “Communities and Local Government Committee—Mutual and cooperative approaches to delivering local services” (2012) at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmcomloc/112/112we06.htm> [Accessed June 19, 2015].

<sup>45</sup> Interview 3.

<sup>46</sup> Interview 3.

An example of this is the Localism Act's reforms to neighbourhood planning, which, as Stanton explains, seem to:

“[P]aint a picture of community-led initiative being encouraged subject constantly to higher approval and supervision. That is, dependent upon and under the ever-watchful eye of the Secretary of State and central government ... [The Act's] provisions are littered with requirements that the Secretary of State retain an overriding say on a number of issues which could, in turn, severely limit the way in which communities might seek to use the powers designed for their benefit.”<sup>47</sup>

This is reflected in the local councils investigated: in Sutton, for instance, initiatives aimed at improving local areas with the involvement of citizens were already up and running. The 2011 Act's provisions, however, seemed just to make the process more bureaucratic.<sup>48</sup>

The manner in which this bureaucracy hinders the achievement of localism generally was considered by a councillor in Hackney who said that: “what they [central government] think of as localism, actually looks quite centralist. It's actually increasing the role of central government”.<sup>49</sup> This is an issue that was actually forecast when the Localism Act was first enacted:

“The [Localism] Act is based on the assumption that empowering communities and local government requires central-government prescription in orders and regulations ... The prospect is that local authorities will be constrained by a plethora of central-government controls ... as central government seeks to determine what should be done locally, rather than the local authority, which knows local conditions and is accountable locally.”<sup>50</sup>

This concern that centralism takes power away from local authorities who are accountable to the local electorate was another issue highlighted in the interviews. Local councillors make decisions and implement policies affecting local areas, and, in doing this, they are accountable to local people. The problem is, however, that without appropriate decentralisation and, instead, with centralist, bureaucratic control of local authority action, councillors are held accountable for central government's directions and decisions. A councillor in Sutton explained:

“[W]hen it comes to decision-making on a local level, it is the local councils that are accountable; so whenever [the government] ... tells us what to do with our council tax, what to do with our bins and our waste collection ... he's not directly accountable. It's the councillors that are accountable.”<sup>51</sup>

Similar concerns were discussed in Hackney with regards to the “academisation of schools”:

“In some ... areas ... what [the government] mean by localism ... certainly doesn't mean empowering local authorities ... in education [for example] it's quite clear it means ... an academisation of schools. And free schools and so on. And while there are ... benefits to bits of that programme ... the one thing that it does mean is that local authorities have less of a role in the system ... there's actually quite a centralisation of power there.”<sup>52</sup>

The councillor illustrated by explaining that when a parent has a complaint about one of these academies, as they are independent and not overseen by the local authority, councillors have no real power to intervene

<sup>47</sup> J. Stanton, “The Big Society and community development: Neighbourhood planning under the Localism Act” (2014) 16(4) *Environmental Law Review* 262, 269.

<sup>48</sup> Interview 3.

<sup>49</sup> Interview 5.

<sup>50</sup> G. Jones and J. Stewart, “Local Government: the past, the present and the future” (2012) 27(4) *Public Administration* 346, 356.

<sup>51</sup> Interview 3.

<sup>52</sup> Interview 5.



or advise. Instead, local educational issues have to be referred to the Education Funding Agency, “which is a quango in Whitehall ... accountability is to the Secretary of State, not to Hackney”.<sup>53</sup>

The local councillors interviewed, therefore, provide an interesting insight into the Coalition’s localism agenda. Despite promises, efforts and even provisions aimed at decentralisation, the reality has been that local councils do not feel that they are the beneficiaries of any substantial power. The difficult financial cuts have meant that authorities lack the resources necessary to exercise devolved functions and powers, whilst despite intentions to the contrary, recent policies and reforms bring a great deal of bureaucracy and centralised control. The consequent effect of all this is that local government lacks the freedom and the resources to govern local areas effectively, provide local services and serve local people. The manner in which this should be overcome in the future is discussed later, after a consideration of empowerment.

## Empowerment of local citizens

Citizen empowerment involves giving local individuals the power and ability to influence local politics and participate actively in local affairs. It accords with putting “power, influence and responsibility ... into the hands of communities and individual citizens”, enabling “local people [to have] more say in the running and shaping of local services”.<sup>54</sup> The democratic benefit of this is self-evident, with attempts at empowering individuals facilitating the “reinvigoration of local democracy”.<sup>55</sup> On empowerment, the interviews explored the extent to which, from local authorities’ perspectives, local people have been empowered as a result of the government’s localism agenda, particularly in terms of planning and the development of local areas.

The importance of involving local people in local planning is axiomatic and widely recognised. The National Planning Policy Framework, for instance, notes that “local planning authorities should aim to involve all sections of the community in the development of Local Plans and in planning decisions”.<sup>56</sup> Local councillors interviewed also noted the importance of local input. A councillor in Islington, for instance, said that it was “fundamental”, going on to explain how citizens’ involvement had helped shape a local housing estate, making “the whole area a place that people prefer to be in”, noting also how local participation generally served to make service provision more effective and cost efficient.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, in Sutton, citizen involvement was described as vital both in terms of encouraging “people to live in an area they want to live in”,<sup>58</sup> and about tuning into the way in which “people connect to an area”.<sup>59</sup>

On this basis, it is hardly surprising that, back in 2010, the Coalition identified empowerment as one of the essential actions necessary to achieve decentralisation. It noted that: “Government must commit to the active empowerment of local communities”, ensuring that “people ... [can] get involved with, and direct the development of, their communities”.<sup>60</sup> Since then, it has sought to facilitate and encourage the empowerment of local people in a number of ways, often in conjunction with attempts at decentralisation. The Coalition Agreement, for instance, and the broad agenda for localism contained therein, proclaimed that “[w]e will promote ... democratic engagement ... by giving new powers to local councils, communities,

<sup>53</sup> Interview 5.

<sup>54</sup> H. Atkinson, *Local Democracy, civic engagement and community: From New Labour to the Big Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p.55, citing DCLG, “Strong and Prosperous Communities: The Local Government White Paper” (White Paper, Cm.6939-I, 2006) at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/272357/6939.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/272357/6939.pdf) [Accessed June 19, 2015], and DCLG, “Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power” (White Paper, Cm. 427, 2008) at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/228678/7427.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/228678/7427.pdf) [Accessed June 19, 2015].

<sup>55</sup> H. Atkinson, *Local Democracy, civic engagement and community: From New Labour to the Big Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p.55.

<sup>56</sup> DCLG, “National Planning Policy Framework” (London: DCLG, 2012), p.17 at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/6077/2116950.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6077/2116950.pdf) [Accessed June 19, 2015].

<sup>57</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>58</sup> Interview 4.

<sup>59</sup> Interview 3.

<sup>60</sup> DCLG, *Decentralisation and the Localism Bill: An essential guide* (London: DCLG, 2010), p.7.

neighbourhoods and individuals”;<sup>61</sup> whilst the Localism Act’s aforementioned community rights and neighbourhood planning provisions were designed to allow for greater involvement in local services and developments. As Stanier comments:

“Neighbourhood planning is based on the principle that communities should have a say in the new development proposed for their neighbourhood, and that where they do, they are more likely to accept that development.”<sup>62</sup>

On this foundation, investigating the extent to which citizens are empowered, the interviews indicated that local people are generally engaged. In Sutton, for instance, a councillor noted that:

“a lot of people come to local committees ... if there’s something really quite burning on the agenda then you’ll ... get thirty or forty people from an area coming along.”<sup>63</sup>

Sutton boasts a substantial number of volunteers, with “about 40 per cent of [the] ... population volunteer[ing] in one way or another”.<sup>64</sup>

In Richmond, a councillor there identified a prominent culture of volunteerism, noting that “volunteers are so driven”.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the councillor recalled that when chatting informally with a large number of people out in the borough, it was found that “one in two, one in three people ... were volunteers” in some way.<sup>66</sup>

There is, therefore, a rich culture of volunteerism at the local level, and these citizen contributions come in a number of different ways from attendance at public consultations to more active voluntary work. For example, in Richmond, citizens with whom that councillor spoke, talked about forming and running a children’s football team and doing various chores for their neighbours;<sup>67</sup> whilst in Hackney, a councillor explained that there are a number of social events for elderly residents throughout the borough, run entirely by volunteers; and residents’ steering groups, chaired by local tenants.<sup>68</sup> In some instances, the scale of the volunteerism is often so small that citizens sometimes do not even realise that they are contributing to something bigger. As a councillor in Sutton explained, there’s somebody “who goes and collects the papers for his neighbour, or gets somebody’s shopping. He’s not a volunteer, he thinks. But he’s doing stuff that keeps the society glued together”.<sup>69</sup> As another Sutton councillor put it: “If you look, we have got so many community groups, residents’ associations, charities, friends of parks. And they are the life of the community. It’s always been there”.<sup>70</sup> There are a range of ways, therefore, in which citizens can and do volunteer and contribute to local life.

This being so, it is striking that across the Councils included in this study, councillors explained that this culture of volunteerism is taking place *regardless* of anything the Coalition has introduced as part of its localism agenda or in the name of the Big Society and, in some cases, local initiatives were even pre-empting the government’s attempts. In Hackney, for instance, “independently of whether the Government’s talking about the Big Society, that stuff [volunteerism] has just always been there, and is there”.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, in Kensington and Chelsea, the culture of empowerment and citizen involvement happens “irrespective of anything that ... the Big Society has done”.<sup>72</sup> In Islington, too, a councillor

<sup>61</sup> HM Government, *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government* (London: Cabinet Office, 2010), p.11.

<sup>62</sup> R. Stanier, “Local heroes: Neighbourhood planning in practice” (2014) 13 Supp (Power to the People?) *Journal of Planning and Environmental Law* OP105 at OP105.

<sup>63</sup> Interview 4.

<sup>64</sup> Interview 4.

<sup>65</sup> Interview 2.

<sup>66</sup> Interview 2.

<sup>67</sup> Interview 2.

<sup>68</sup> Interview 5.

<sup>69</sup> Interview 4.

<sup>70</sup> Interview 3.

<sup>71</sup> Interview 5.

<sup>72</sup> Interview 7.

explained that the Coalition's impact with regards to local empowerment is somewhat limited. They considered that there is:

“a little bit more awareness ... and that's probably resulted in some more people coming forwards, more than perhaps there would have been before. [But,] I don't think it's made a huge difference. I'm not entirely sure anything the Government can do can really change things.”<sup>73</sup>

This seems particularly to be the case with regards to neighbourhood planning—in some boroughs, such initiatives had already taken off pre-2012 (when the Localism Act's neighbourhood planning provisions took effect). A councillor in Richmond explained, for instance, that “we pre-empted [the Neighbourhood Plan] ... because our village plan came in in 2010”.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, in Sutton, a councillor explained that:

“we've got the tagline ‘*Take Part, Take Pride*’, which has been around for quite some time. [It is] about people taking part in getting involved in community activities, and being proud of their Borough.”<sup>75</sup>

Connected with this and as part of the community ethos in Sutton, citizens have already and previously been involved in decisions affecting the improvement of the local area, illustrated by instances in the Borough of citizens coming together to improve and protect a local park.<sup>76</sup> Consequently, when neighbourhood planning was introduced by the Localism Act, it seemed to mirror some of what was already going on. The councillor in Sutton explained:

“we had already got one up and running ... it was neighbourhood planning by a different name ... formed to change the [local] area.”<sup>77</sup>

When the Act came in, the councillor noted that:

“it gave us ... a boost; but since then, basically we've just carried on as normal ... it was almost making what we [already] do more bureaucratic.”<sup>78</sup>

Despite the reforms and policies to improve empowerment and encourage greater citizen involvement, therefore, the Coalition has had a limited impact on local trends which actually show a relatively healthy level of local volunteerism. Why is it, then, that local citizens are seemingly empowered, if not as a result of anything that the Government is doing? In short, it comes down to local factors—the individuals themselves, the sense of community and even the work of local authorities, as this section will now explore.

One of the main drivers behind local empowerment is the individuals. A councillor in Kensington and Chelsea suggested that “it goes back to the goodness of their [own] hearts”.<sup>79</sup> People participate and contribute to local communities, not because the government facilitates their involvement or encourages them to “play their part” but because they feel inclined and motivated to “do their bit”. Indeed, a councillor in Islington added that, “people are most likely to volunteer if they feel that they can make a difference”.<sup>80</sup>

This inclination of individuals to participate, though, is connected to something bigger—a sense of community spirit. As a councillor in Kensington and Chelsea put it, “the Kensington society is vibrant and makes it a good ambassador for *Kensington-wide* issues”,<sup>81</sup> whilst in Hackney a councillor noted that the “levels of volunteering ... [don't] really change that much ... in Hackney, there's a huge amount of

<sup>73</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>74</sup> Interview 2.

<sup>75</sup> Interview 3.

<sup>76</sup> Interview 3.

<sup>77</sup> Interview 3.

<sup>78</sup> Interview 3.

<sup>79</sup> Interview 7.

<sup>80</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>81</sup> Interview 7.

creative energy around”.<sup>82</sup> Local people are empowered because they feel a part of something special and they want to contribute to the sense of community to which they belong.

A common concern of local initiatives aimed at inspiring citizen engagement, however, is that it is the “usual suspects” who invariably involve themselves in a particular scheme or initiative. Layard, for instance, raises the issue with regards to the Localism Act’s neighbourhood planning provisions.<sup>83</sup>

Citizen involvement across the London Boroughs investigated seems to be no different with councillors there identifying similar trends. In Islington, for instance, it was noted that:

“most of the people ... who are activists in one way or another in their own community, are the same people who would, at election time, go out and vote.”<sup>84</sup>

Also, in Hackney, when asked whether local people tend to take up available opportunities to get involved, a councillor there stated: “Yes. I mean, of course, not everyone ... I think in most places you would say there is a ... small number of people who tend to be very intensively involved”.<sup>85</sup> That councillor went on to downplay these concerns and explain how they might be countered:

“[Y]ou ... shouldn’t be sniffy about ... ‘Oh it’s the usual suspects’ ... that’s just always the case anyway, in human history ... a small number of people who have the energy and commitment to come along. And ... you can’t then say ‘Well, they’re always going to be representative of wider opinion’. They very often aren’t ... so you have to balance the two. You have to have both direct ways of people directly being involved and having direct control, which does mean that a small group of those who do turn up, the most activist people, will always have more say. But you then have to balance that through elected councillors, through wider public engagement exercises, referendums ... with getting the view of the wider people as well.”<sup>86</sup>

This is an attractive solution, and one that takes into consideration the reality that, as much as governments seek to encourage a greater proportion of society to get involved, inclination, motivation, and competing commitments—to list just three factors—often conspire to prevent this from happening in any widespread manner.

In many respects, this is already done. Citizens have the choice either to take up active roles in society (such as, for example, through involvement in planning and regeneration initiatives<sup>87</sup>), or simply to input into consultative exercises and vote in elections and referenda. But it is important that councils are able to facilitate and encourage involvement in a variety of ways, allowing for both the direct and indirect participation of citizens.

Sutton, for instance, has long been a community focused area (part of the reason underlying its selection as a Big Society Vanguard area<sup>88</sup>) and it is this that has helped inspire local empowerment across the Borough. One of the councillors explained:

“We have always been very community minded in Sutton, it’s part of our political philosophy; about people being involved, having control, taking control of their lives ... If you look, we have got so many community groups, residents’ associations, charities, friends of parks. And they are the life of

<sup>82</sup> Interview 5.

<sup>83</sup> A Layard, “Law and localism: The case of multiple occupancy housing” (2012) 32(4) *Legal Studies* 551, 557.

<sup>84</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>85</sup> Interview 5.

<sup>86</sup> Interview 5.

<sup>87</sup> See J. Stanton, *Democratic Sustainability in a New Era of Localism* (Abingdon: Routledge-Earthscan, 2014).

<sup>88</sup> Big Society Vanguard areas were identified by David Cameron as “training grounds” for the proposed changes introduced as part of the Big Society policy. As well as Sutton, Eden Valley in Cumbria; Windsor and Maidenhead; and Liverpool were also identified (see David Cameron, *Big Society Speech*, July 19, 2010 at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/big-society-speech> [Accessed June 19, 2015]).

the community. It's always been there. It's about harnessing that and making the most of it, by getting them involved.”<sup>89</sup>

Of course, there is perhaps a sense that, as one councillor in Islington put it:

“for councils in a financially constrained time ... the more you can get volunteers to do things, the less you have to do it yourself. And while ... there is [always] a whole range of things that ... the full time professionals [in councils] need to be doing, there is a role for [volunteering] amateurs.”<sup>90</sup>

Indeed, this is a view consistent with the aims of the Big Society, in respect of which the Government noted that “[w]e need to draw on the skills and expertise of people across the country as we respond to the social, political and economic challenges Britain faces”.<sup>91</sup> More than this, though, above and beyond any policy that centralised government might introduce, local authorities do have a key role to play in facilitating and encouraging citizen involvement.

This role, however, is not an easy one to fulfil. Whilst, on the one hand, local authorities are perfectly placed to facilitate and encourage citizen empowerment, the difficulty that they then face is having to deal with the plethora of conflicting views that this can present. A councillor in Kensington and Chelsea explained:

“Many people in the planning department would say that [the neighbourhood planning provisions are] ... a lovely idea in practice, but the problems that you can have with certain local groups creating what they want which may not be the same as what the rest of the borough has, and they have the legitimacy because it's neighbourhood plan because they've had the referendum. And actually it is opposed to ... quite a lot of the relevant other planning strategy documents and so on. It's the government creating a rod for local government's back ... the more you delegate down, the more challenging it can be if you want to keep certain aspects of planning to the high standard that has hitherto been the case.”<sup>92</sup>

Indeed, this was a concern also raised in Hackney, where a councillor illustrated the issue with regards to conflicting housing needs of local Haredi and non-Haredi communities:

“We've had a big debate here ... it's quite polarised because the Haredi community ... has huge housing needs and is very concerned about our planning rules, which mean that it's difficult for them to extend their houses ... Equally, the non-Haredi residents there don't want people to just be able to put one or two stories on top of a house because that affects their amenity ... So we have a situation where we have one of these neighbourhood forums set up and there was a feeling that it would be dominated by one community that had a particular view, ... at the expense of others ... So that's a really interesting example where actually devolving planning control ... poses a danger to community cohesion ... Some parts of the community want powers, some parts of the community don't want the community to have powers.”<sup>93</sup>

The interviews, therefore, have provided interesting insights into trends of citizen empowerment. Though governments often come into power amid promises to increase local involvement and “people power”, this is perhaps out of tune with reality. Citizens, it seems, are empowered and, where motivated, do contribute to the development of local communities and play their parts in society. This has long been the case and is likely to be the case regardless of anything the government might introduce. As the next section

<sup>89</sup> Interview 3.

<sup>90</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>91</sup> Cabinet Office, *Building the Big Society* (2010), p.1 at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/building-the-big-society> [Accessed June 19, 2015].

<sup>92</sup> Interview 7.

<sup>93</sup> Interview 5.

will explore, what is needed is an appreciation of the various ways in which citizens can and do volunteer, and a realisation that this does not necessarily need to be prescribed from the centre.

Thus far, then, this article has drawn from the interviews in considering how the Coalition's objectives with regards to decentralisation and empowerment have been implemented, with a particular emphasis on local planning. It has shown that, despite certain provisions seeking to devolve powers to local authorities, councillors do not feel that decentralisation has happened in any meaningful way. This is due, in part, to the financial cuts imposed on councils as well as the bureaucratic nature of recent reforms and policies. In addition, the article has shown that citizens are generally empowered, and that regardless of reforms and policies introduced by the government, people feel a sense of community and, on the back of this, a motivation and inclination to get involved. Change is needed, therefore, to enable more effective decentralisation and to bring the government in line with citizen involvement patterns, as the next section will now explore.

### Freedom for local authorities

Local councils need greater freedom. That is, freedom to use decentralised powers appropriately and freedom for citizens to be involved in their own ways and not in a manner prescribed at the centre. This final section explores the importance of achieving this local freedom and how it should be sought.

It was noted, above, that decentralisation is about so much more than the passing of statutory provisions, empowering local authorities to do certain things and fulfil certain roles. It is about creating an environment in which councils can make the most of powers that are bestowed upon them and facilitating the exercise of decentralised power at the local level. This, it is suggested, is dependent on two things, firstly, the allocation of power; and secondly, the freedom to exercise that power.

In many respects, the first of these is being accomplished. Central government has introduced provisions aimed at increasing local authorities' powers. The aforementioned community rights and neighbourhood planning provisions, for instance. Also, the general power of competence, set out in Localism Act s.1,<sup>94</sup> has been well received, with councillors describing it as "welcome",<sup>95</sup> and as making it "slightly easier ... to try something that's out of the mainstream".<sup>96</sup> Indeed:

"there's quite a few [other] things that have been passed down from central government to local government. For example, the council tax reduction scheme, crisis loans and grants scheme ... council tax benefits scheme."<sup>97</sup>

Though there are, of course, areas where local authorities would like to see greater power—planning being one identified by a number of the councillors—the issue is less with the provisions and more with the way in which local authorities can use them.

This brings us to the second aspect of decentralisation—the freedom to exercise and use devolved powers. This, it is argued, remains unaccomplished: local authorities evidently lack and require the freedom to be able to use decentralised powers appropriately and with the necessary resources. It is this that hinders effective decentralisation and the realisation of the Coalition's localism agenda.

Identification of this need to establish greater local freedom is not new. Lowndes and Pratchett discuss the Conservative's own realisation of "the need to create greater freedoms for local government and local communities".<sup>98</sup> However, the extent to which this has been achieved is reflected in the interviews discussed

<sup>94</sup> This gives local authorities the "power to do anything that individuals generally may do". See further: A. Bowes and J. Stanton, "The Localism Act 2011 and the general power of competence" (2014) Public Law 392.

<sup>95</sup> Interview 5.

<sup>96</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>97</sup> Interview 3.

<sup>98</sup> V. Lowndes and L. Pratchett, "Local Governance under the Coalition Government: Austerity, Localism and the 'Big Society'" (2012) 38(1) *Local Government Studies* 21, 26.

throughout this article. A councillor in Islington, for instance, highlights the need to “[I]et the local authorities have the freedom to make local decisions, to raise local taxes, to carry out the things that they think are needed in their area”,<sup>99</sup> In addition, Jones and Stewart consider that:

“the government’s approach fails to recognize that the main barriers to the development of localism lie in central government itself ... [t]he [Localism] Act is based on the assumption that empowering communities and local government requires central-government prescription.”<sup>100</sup>

Despite all that the Coalition has attempted, therefore, a culture of centralism seems to persist and it is this that has been at the heart of the government’s problems. Future attempts at local democratic invigoration need to cut away the centrally-set targets and objectives, remove the over-prescriptive supervision of local power and afford councils the freedom necessary to operate appropriately and effectively. As a councillor in Sutton explains, “we need to find ways of cutting the bureaucracy ... central government seems to think the answer to everything is laws, because that’s what they do”.<sup>101</sup>

This would undoubtedly involve a change in attitude, as prescriptive and bureaucratic centralisation has been a concern for many years.<sup>102</sup> The Communities and Local Government Select Committee on Localism notes, though, that ministers need to:

“rein in their interventionist instincts ... Central government cannot have it both ways—on the one hand giving local authorities the freedom to make their own choices, and on the other maintaining that only one of those choices is the ‘sensible’ one.”<sup>103</sup>

Local government is capable of taking full control of decision-making affecting local people and of exercising power for the good of a local area, without overly restrictive influences from the centre. Indeed, discussing values at the heart of the Big Society, a councillor in Sutton said that:

“it’s everything Sutton has ever done, for the last 25 years, [it’s] about community empowerment, about bringing the community together ... it’s what we do.”<sup>104</sup>

Similarly, in Kensington and Chelsea, a councillor there said that the Big Society “goes back hundreds and hundreds of years”.<sup>105</sup> Local authorities, therefore, do not need a detailed government policy or extensive legislative framework to be able to operate effectively and for the good of local people, they need the freedom to use powers in locally appropriate and relevant ways and they need central government to “let go” and trust the reliable local institutions.

In a big way, part of this freedom is money—ensuring local authorities have the appropriate resources to use local powers. This article has already explained the level of cuts that local authorities have recently endured, and councillors have commented on their impact.

In one sense, local government’s lack of freedom is connected with the cuts. A councillor in Islington has already been quoted as saying that “[y]ou haven’t got freedom if you haven’t got the money to actually use that freedom”.<sup>106</sup> In addition, it was noted in Sutton that:

“[a]ll the pressure has been on local government to make the cuts and deal with the deficit ... and [we] manage it by the skin of our teeth.”<sup>107</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>100</sup> G. Jones and J. Stewart, “Local Government: the past, the present and the future” (2012) 27(4) *Public Administration* 346, 355–6.

<sup>101</sup> Interview 3.

<sup>102</sup> J. Stanton, *Democratic Sustainability in a New Era of Localism* (Abingdon: Routledge-Earthscan, 2014), pp.65–74.

<sup>103</sup> House of Commons, “Communities and Local Government Select Committee, Localism” (HC 547, 2011), p.84 at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/201012/cmselect/cmcomloc/547/547.pdf> [Accessed June 19, 2015]; cited in M. Buser, “Tracing the Democratic Narrative: Big Society, Localism and Civic Engagement” (2013) 39(1) *Local Government Studies* 3, 8.

<sup>104</sup> Interview 4.

<sup>105</sup> Interview 7.

<sup>106</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>107</sup> Interview 3.

What is needed, then, is not necessarily more money (something that would be difficult to obtain in the current financial climate) but local freedom in the form of greater control over local money. As that councillor in Sutton puts it:

“the way to [achieve decentralisation] ... is to loosen the control the treasury has ... The Treasury decide from one year to the next what local government is, or isn’t going to get. We’ve had last minute changes half-way through the year. How can you plan ahead under that kind of control? When you don’t actually know what you’ve got coming in? ... the Treasury have such a tight grip on things.”<sup>108</sup>

This is echoed by Jones and Stewart who consider that there is a:

“need to reduce local government’s dependence on high levels of central grant and for an extension of local government’s own tax base, bearing on local voters.”<sup>109</sup>

Setting aside, for a moment, the need for greater control over local finances, however, the more pressing consideration is how councils cope with the cuts already imposed. Jones and Stewart suggest that this presents an opportunity for local government to “take the initiative, [make] their own plans, and not wait to be told what to do by central government”, something that they should do with the involvement of citizens, community associations and voluntary bodies.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, according to a councillor in Sutton, this is already happening:

“We’ve managed to be quite careful with how we’ve made these savings up ‘til now ... we’ve done all the rationalisation and streamlining ... we’ve got to ... find the way that impacts least on our residents, or least on those that are less able to look after themselves’.”<sup>111</sup>

Prioritisation of local services, therefore, is a necessary part of dealing with the cuts. Another solution, set out by a councillor in Hackney, centres on pooling budgets together for a more integrated approach to local activity:

“if you’ve got less money as a local council, and you’ve got less money as a health service, and you’ve got less money in the criminal justice system, the only way in which you might be able to achieve the outcomes that you want, at the same level, or in a better way, is by bringing your money together ... if you give local authorities, and others more, longer term financial settlements ... they might be able to do it better because they might be able to bring in lots of different services and have a more integrated approach.”<sup>112</sup>

These solutions, however, can only help for so long. Money is vital to local freedom and until councils are either given more funds or greater control over local money, any powers and roles that they play will be restricted by the purse strings of Whitehall.

A final point to consider in respect of this need for greater local freedom relates to empowerment. It was noted above that citizens are generally empowered, to varying degrees, often regardless of anything central government does. This, it is argued, is indicative of the freedom required and the capabilities of local people: by getting involved, regardless of central government supervision, citizens are clearly minded to “do their bit” out of the goodness of their own hearts.

Increasing the freedom of local authorities, however, could also improve and increase the opportunities for citizen empowerment and allow for local involvement in unique and innovative ways, rather than in

<sup>108</sup> Interview 3.

<sup>109</sup> G. Jones and J. Stewart, “Local Government: the past, the present and the future” (2012) 27(4) *Public Administration* 346, 363–4.

<sup>110</sup> G. Jones and J. Stewart, “Local Government: the past, the present and the future” (2012) 27(4) *Public Administration* 346, 364.

<sup>111</sup> Interview 4.

<sup>112</sup> Interview 5.



the manner prescribed at the centre. Indeed, demonstrating the effect that a *lack* of freedom has on citizen empowerment, a councillor in Sutton explains that:

“if you want to encourage local democracy, you have to encourage local politicians to take part and to do it. And there’s nothing more off-putting to people who might want to take part than to find that ‘well, you can’t do this because the Government says you can’t. You can’t do that because the Government says you can’t have any money for it’.”<sup>113</sup>

This was echoed by a councillor in Islington who noted:

“people are most likely to volunteer if they feel that they can make a difference, and ... the more remote the decision-making is ... the less they’re likely to volunteer.”<sup>114</sup>

Increasing local freedom, therefore, is not only a key part of ensuring effective decentralisation, but also crucial to the empowerment of citizens, motivating them more prominently to “do their bit”, separate from centralised interference.

## Concluding remarks

Decentralisation and empowerment, therefore, have been central to the Coalition Government’s localism agenda and Big Society policy. Despite provisions and policies seeking to push power down and get people involved, though, local councils do not feel that they have been the beneficiaries of any substantial power, whilst citizens seem empowered regardless of central government activity. This is perhaps indicative of a wider problem regarding the relationship between central and local government; as a councillor in Sutton explained: “there are two parties in this country, there’s the local government party and a national government party”.<sup>115</sup> Wider discussion on that is needed. For now, though, central government needs to afford councils greater freedom so that decentralised power can be used more effectively to govern local areas, and greater freedom to empower local people to play an important part in local politics, in their own unique and locally relevant ways. As a councillor in Richmond explained, we need to “liberate society from big government”.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>113</sup> Interview 4.

<sup>114</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>115</sup> Interview 4.

<sup>116</sup> Interview 2.