Double down on devolution to create powerful communities, Localis report urges

Tuesday 17 November, 2020

Ministers must make full use of the forthcoming Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper to give communities the power and resources they need to build back a better society, a report by the think-tank Localis has advised.

In a study issued today entitled **'Renewing Neighbourhood Democracy – Creating Powerful Communities'** the think-tank calls on central government to facilitate a clear pathway for communities to take control over local services, assets and social infrastructure.

The paper argues government should enshrine the rights of communities to self-organise by creating 'pop up parishes' and set local spending choices at neighbourhood level through 'people's budgets'.

Other key report recommendations for strengthening communities to build back better at hyperlocal level include:

- **establishing a £2bn Community Wealth Fund to** specifically target the social and civic infrastructure of 'left behind' neighbourhoods across the country. This would be an independent endowment that would be distributed over the course of 10-15 years to build and sustain the social capital of communities.
- **giving local councils a statutory role** for managing double devolution and community relations, to act as a single point of contact and information for community groups looking to establish forms of local control.
- **launching an urgent government review to** renew and extend financial support for voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations in a manner similar to the Small Business Grant fund to respond to the pandemic, particularly as the reintroduction of lockdown measures escalates.

Localis chief executive, Jonathan Werran, said: "If this is to be a teachable moment, then we must place greater trust in our communities to provide the impetus for social renewal and economic recovery.

"This must mean a genuine commitment from government for double devolution under which communities receive full powers and support to develop greater genuine autonomy and assume control for scripting their own local destinies."

Localis head of research, Joe Fyans, said: ""The importance of our social infrastructure – our community hubs, our public spaces and volunteer organisations – to our national resilience has been made abundantly clear in 2020. Across the country however, there is wide variation in the amount of social infrastructure available to communities, with many places 'left behind' in an endless cycle of short-lived and top-down policy initiatives.

"This report looks towards a fair and lasting settlement for the protection of social infrastructure and the expansion of neighbourhood autonomy. Looking at lessons from history and case studies both domestic and international, we outline some steps to take in 2021 to shore up our social infrastructure in all parts of the country and create space for communities to take power into their own hands."

Matt Leach, CEO Local Trust, said: "This pandemic has highlighted the vitality and resilience of community spirit, right across the country. We must harness this real community moment, to not only build back better, but build up from below.

"That means seizing the opportunity of the impending Local Recovery and Devolution white paper to ensure communities gain real power that comes from them building their own institutions, that are real and relevant to them, and can act as a counterbalance and complement to the state.

"The ideas included in this report of a Community Wealth Fund, 'pop up parishes', and stronger community rights, will play an integral part in renewing democracy and creating powerful communities."

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Notes to Editors:

1. **An advance copy of the report is available for download**. "Renewing Neighbourhood Democracy – Creating Powerful Communities'

Report Launch – Tuesday 17 November from 11.00 to 12.00 via Zoom Webinar

The report is being launched from 11.00 to 12.00 on Tuesday 17 November via Zoom Webinar with a panel debate that includes:

- Danny Kruger MP for Devizes and author of 'Levelling up our communities,' ;
- Alison McKenzie-Folan, chief executive Wigan Council;
- Jo Phillips, award-winning journalist and political adviser;
- Rayhan Haque, Local Trust senior policy adviser.

Registration is via Eventbrite:

1. **About Localis**

Localis is an independent think-tank dedicated to issues related to politics, public service reform and localism. We carry out innovative research, hold events and facilitate an ever growing network of members to stimulate and challenge the current orthodoxy of the governance of the UK.

www.localis.org.uk

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live. We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

localtrust.org.uk

1. **Report Recommendations**

1. **The Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper should codify the role of councils in a facilitative local state by beginning the process of creating clear, statutory pathways to community autonomy.**

1. The white paper should identify areas of service delivery that could be co-designed, run in partnership or devolved entirely to the neighbourhood-level, particularly if the size of local authorities is to increase with reforms.
2. A statutory role should be created in local authorities for managing double devolution and community relations, to act as a single point of contact and information for community groups looking to establish forms of local control.
3. Building on previous work from London Councils and Danny Kruger MP, the ‘pop-up parish’ or Community Improvement District model should be extended as a statutory community right alongside the previous rights established in the Localism Act 2011.
4. Pathways should be developed for communities to take control of non-core service spending at neighbourhood level through initiatives like the People’s Budget in Frome.

1. **To enshrine the principle of double devolution and expand upon the Localism Act’s establishment of Community Rights, the Local Recovery and Devolution White Paper should extend these rights to give the community greater power over local assets and social infrastructure.**

1. All assets that qualify as having community value under the current system should be designated as social infrastructure.
2. If a community group decides to take on a community asset, they should be supported, both procedurally and financially, in their endeavours to do so.

1. **The introduction of localised lockdowns has further emphasised the importance of front-line action from community groups. The government should urgently renew and extend financial support for voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations to respond to the pandemic, particularly as the reintroduction of lockdown measures escalates.**

1. To ensure fast and targeted response, a fund could be distributed to community organisations by local councils in lockdown areas in a manner similar to the distribution of the pandemic-related Small Business Grant Fund
2. As with the Small Business Grant Fund, the focus should be on rescue at any cost for the sake of national resilience, and the overall fund should be matched to need rather than to a specific cash limit.

1. **In order to strengthen social infrastructure, and properly resource endeavours to empower communities in a manner that is participatory and gets results, central government should commit to establishing a Community Wealth Fund**

    1. The fund would specifically target the social and civic infrastructure of ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods across the country. It would be an independent endowment that would be distributed over the course of 10-15 years, include investment at the hyperlocal level, decision-making would be community-led and, as part of the package, support would be provided in order to build and sustain the social capital of communities and their capacity to be involved. Recently, this call for a hyperlocal focused funding of £2bn was echoed by Danny Kruger MP in his proposal for a ‘Levelling Up Communities Fund’.

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Additional Assets:
Renewing Neighbourhood Democracy - Creating Powerful Communities - final report

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