Empower Covid community renewal or sink grass roots recovery hopes, Localis report warns

Wednesday 3 June, 2020

Ministers must fund and empower local people to run vital community businesses and service hubs which can help neighbourhoods thrive beyond the immediate Covid pandemic, a report by the think-tank Localis has recommended.

In a report issued today entitled **'Local Delivery – protecting social infrastructure'** the think-tank calls on central government to show greater consistency and political will in supporting grass roots community ventures - or risk hampering recovery by sapping the energy and enthusiasm of capable volunteers.

The report calls on government to guarantee more secured and core funding to community asset bids, especially in less affluent places - and to also ensure volunteers are not threatened with benefit cuts in deprived areas where local people must take responsibility for building community capacity.

Other key report recommendations include calls to ensure:

- The provision of parks and open spaces alongside support for 'friends of' groups should be a statutory requirement for councils.
- The six-month moratorium in selling an asset which is currently allowed to the community under Right to Bid should be extended to 12 months.
- Local authorities promote investment in community groups as a positive factor in the evaluation of social value elements when awarding public contracts.
- Social investment should come in the form of low-cost loans from local authorities as part of 'co-investment' - and 'payback' for loans should encompass non-financial capital benefits such as health and wellbeing dividends of park management.

Localis chief executive, Jonathan Werran said: "At a time when our very concept of social contact is being distorted and threatened by the need to respond to the C19 pandemic, our need for strong community ties has, paradoxically, never been greater.

"The recovery will be driven as much by the dictates of restoring social wellbeing as economic renewal. So policy must be directed to allowing capable local people to provide all manner of niche services and neighbourhood enterprises in their community facilities and care for much-loved open spaces also."

Report author, Grace Newcombe, said: "In these unprecedented times, despite financial pressures and social restrictions, many community organisations have succeeded in adapting, rallying support from the community to provide services and a much-needed sense of normalcy. Their ability to mobilise and respond to the immediate needs of the community highlights their importance as providers of social cohesion, crucial in the face of uncertainty.

"Over lockdown, we have realised the real significance of our local services and open spaces. Community groups need support to remain autonomous and make their voices heard in the planning and delivery of services for community wellbeing, having best captured true community spirit during the pandemic."

Richard Harries, Director of the Power to Change Research Institute, said: "Months of social distancing have torn communities apart, separating children from their grandparents, and leaving many others coping alone with grief and loss. Yet it has also brought communities together, as we gather each week to clap for the NHS and carers, and as we find new ways to share parks and green spaces.

"This timely report presents central and local government with a golden opportunity to build on this national spirit of goodwill. We knew before the pandemic that local people were often best placed to meet local challenges. With millions of new volunteers keen to support others in their communities, now is the time to completely rethink how we invest in our shared social infrastructure."

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Notes to Editors:

1. **A full copy of the report can be downloaded here**: **Local Delivery – protecting social infrastructure**

1. **Organisations involved**

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.

About Power to Change

We work with community businesses to revive local assets, protect the services people rely on, and address local needs.

Our vision is to create better places through community business. We will use our endowment to strengthen community businesses across England. This means providing money, advice and support to help local people come together to take control. At a time when many parts of the country face cuts, neglect and social problems, we want to make sure local areas survive and stay vibrant. We do so by being bold, collaborative, open and informed.

Our endowment came from the Big Lottery Fund in 2015 (now The National Lottery Community Fund).

1. **Report Recommendations**

Local government policy

There must be more consistency across the local government sector in recognising the importance of local social infrastructure.
Local government can also play a key role in fostering a network of community organisations, groups and hubs where resources and knowledge can be shared locally. To strengthen and enhance the hyper-local resilience fostered by community hubs, councils should have an active **community assets register** taking stock of physical assets, hub spaces and community enterprises.

Social investment should come in the form of low-cost loans from local authorities as part of 'co-investment'.

- This retains the local authority stake in asset management whilst allowing for community control.
- 'Payback' for loans should encompass non-financial capital benefits such as health and wellbeing dividends of park management.
- There are instances where the benefits can only be measured over time – for instance health and wellbeing impact of access to green space needs to be measured in conjunction with local primary care health services .

Local authorities should promote investment in community groups as a positive factor in the evaluation of social value elements when awarding public contracts.

Central government policy

Secured and core funding should be made more readily available by central government for community bids. This could include:

- Ring-fencing funds from national bodies such as the National Lottery Community Fund for community ownership (as seen in Scotland). The awarding of funds should be as unrestrictive as possible, giving the group freedom and autonomy to do with it what they see fit.
- Extra support and resources should be allocated for community organisations in less affluent areas.
- People who volunteer on a regular basis should not face benefit cuts – in more deprived areas this is vital to enable local people to take the initiative and build community capacity.

Community Asset Transfer should be redesigned with more stringent recognition of liabilities taken on by community groups.

- Councils should be required to hand over buildings in good condition to ensure security of tenure or provide a reduction in the transfer cost to the community to cover liability costs.

Central government should establish a fund to provide access to pre-feasibility and feasibility funding (early-stage development funding), rather than funding provided once there is more certainty in the project.

- This will ensure that the prospect of community ownership has been given a fair hearing in the right to bid process.
- This could be a project co-designed with the Local Government Association or organisations such as Localis or Power to Change with a view to providing a template for evaluation.

The six-month moratorium in selling an asset which is currently allowed to the community under Right to Bid should be extended to 12 months.

Provision of parks and open spaces alongside support for ‘friends of’ groups should be a statutory requirement for councils.

COVID19 has starkly highlighted the inequalities in access to open space, be it a courtyard, park, allotment or balcony. While some of this can be addressed through planning and building policy, it could be relatively quick and simple for people in a street or estate to organise regular car free days IF they have the support of the local authority.

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