

**Localism Bill Committee**  
**Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> February (Morning)**  
**[David Amess in the Chair]**  
Localism Bill

## Overview

The session focused primarily on [Part 4 Chapter 1](#) of the Bill dealing with local referendums and the specifics of several Clauses contained within. The Government had set out their stall towards the end of last year when details, and then eventually the Bill itself, emerged. The Bill will include plans for people to be able to petition for referendums on any local issue, including pay of chief executives, contentious planning applications and council tax. This was reiterated in the opening exchanges by Andrew Stunnell, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at CLG, who argued that the existing framework for referendums and petitions was “*unnecessarily cumbersome and bureaucratic for local authorities*”. Labour’s response centred on the cost of local referenda and the need for statutory safeguards so, as Barbara Keeley put it, local authorities do not “*end up with a referendum every two minutes.*”

## Ninth Sitting (10:30am)

Barbara Keely, Shadow DCLG Minister, opened the session outlining the Opposition’s concerns. The Bill, as it stands, does not contain sufficient safeguards to ensure that local authorities weren’t “*deluged*” with requests for referenda. The cost implications to hold a referendum for local authorities, who are facing significant cuts in their budgets, was a concern – and the Shadow CLG team wanted to ensure that adequate compensation would be offered by central government.

David Ward MP (Lib Dem, Bradford East) countered that the potential proliferation of referenda was “*one step too far*” as it sent a “*downright patronising and downright contemptuous*” view of elected local representatives. Nicholas Dakin MP (Labour, Scunthorpe) added that referendums and petitions have a long-established tradition in British democracy, if the Government is serious about localism, he added, then elected representatives “*really need to listen to local people and to the evidence that they gave to us*”.

Heidi Alexander MP (Labour, Lewisham East) raised the point that the Bill prescribes that the referendums are non-binding, local authorities currently have no statutory right to adhere to the outcome of a referendum. It is an “*expensive gesture*” to potentially hold so many referenda without the guarantee of policy change, and merely serves to sow uncertainty and delay to local decision-making. Ms Alexander asked the Committee whether a referendum on a large planning application would be taken into material consideration by local authorities and, if needed, the Secretary of State. This was, the Chair noted, to be discussed later on in proceedings.

Andrew Stunnell spoke in response for the Government, rebutted the allegation that local authorities would have to take no regard to the outcome of a referendum or petitions submitted. “*Any sensible, prudent local authority will take proper regard to the views of its citizens*” he

replied, before noting that all referendums – bar the 2009 congestion charge referendum in Manchester – had been non-binding. It was standard practice, but councils ought to take results into “*due consideration*”.

Drawing on wider points for the Government’s case, Mr Stunnell argued that the Bill sets the framework for local people to trigger referendums. Given the significant impact of the referendum result, it is necessary for local authorities to adhere to robust processes when dealing with such examples of direct democracy. Government involvement in this aspect of the localism agenda is therefore appropriate. Whilst enhancing the power of the citizen, giving residents greater influence, increasing participation and making councils more accountable, the localism agenda also respected elected local representatives and is why the Government is implementing non-binding referendums.

Nick Raynsford (Labour, Woolwich), former Minister for Local Government, outlined his chief concerns. Referendums may play into the hands of highly vocal populist groups, particularly in respect of contentious planning applications. One or two wards within a local authority area which hold a very strong view may dictate the outcome, thus presenting a distorted view. All this can undermine the position of local councils who are elected to make decisions for the local area.

- Ends -