

THE INDEPENDENT

Why are some campaigners calling the Localism Bill a Nimby's charter?

It promises to give power to the community and herald a planning revolution

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Vocal villagers: Housing Minister Grant Shapps at rally before the election

Life it seems is about to get a lot more local. The future of your town or village, the way your street will look and even your ability to extend your own home will all be decided by your neighbours in the years to come.

The publication earlier this week of the Coalition's Localism Bill heralds the biggest sea change in planning policy since the introduction of the Planning Act after the Second World War. The flagship of David Cameron's controversial Big Society philosophy, it promises sweeping new plans to put local communities people at the heart of planning to let them shape the way their neighbourhoods develop (or not).

The Bill includes a raft of legislation relating to planning that aims to move power from the centre to the community. Which, according to Planning Minister Greg Clark, can only be a good thing: "This will be a huge opportunity for communities to exercise genuine influence over what their home town should look like in the future. It will create the freedom and the incentives for those places that want to grow, to do so."

For the homeowner it means several possibilities. You could become a part of a neighbourhood group that decides your local planning strategy and decides on individual application. If new homes are built in your area, your local neighbourhood might be able to negotiate a financial incentive in return for granting approval; if you want to extend, you

might find that your neighbourhood has pre-determined your application and you can progress without applying.

Under the Community Right to Build element of the Bill, you could also apply to build your own home in certain circumstances on specially-designated land that will be kept in Trust for the benefit of the local community. Grant Shapps, the Housing Minister, says: "These community-led developments won't need normal planning permission but will instead need to pass the test of public opinion and gain the support of more than half of voters in a local referendum." He also admits that the plans are likely to develop. "We purposely want to minimise centralised direction and let it develop of its own accord."

Several councils have already jumped at the chance to let local communities shape their own fate. David Evans, Chief Planner at West Dorset District Council sees it as an opportunity for local people to have real control. "The planning system of old was too complex, too prescriptive and too slow," he explains. "Communities felt that planning wasn't something for them, rather it was something done to them and as a result there was increasing concern from local residents that overdevelopment was affecting their neighbourhoods.

So how will it work in practice? "Local neighbourhoods will be able to present Neighbourhood Plans that set in stone how their community will develop," explains Evans. "The plan is then put to the local community for voting in a referendum, and if it gets a majority it gets passed into policy.

"What's interesting is that this Neighbourhood Plan will supersede any local authority plans and housing targets – meaning that if locals wanted to build some homes on agricultural land, they could. More specific Neighbourhood Development Orders can also be produced by these local groups which will enable specific types of development (such as extensions) to happen without the need for applying planning permission. However, they can just as easily put blanket bans on certain types of development (such as extensions) too."

A good example of where centralised planning is going wrong is in Crowthorne, Berkshire, where the parish councils are having to pay for professional advice to oppose the plans to build more than 3,000 new homes (at sites including Broadmoor Hospital) being imposed by the Borough – effectively locals are paying to support both sides of the argument.

The principles of the Localism Bill are appealing to Andy Holley, of Crowthorne Village Action Group, which opposes the home-building plans. "Anything which returns decision making to the local community is to be welcomed. We are reasonable, intelligent people and we all agree that there has to be development in our community. We recognise the need for homes, not least because our children need somewhere affordable to live. But that development has to be sustainable and properly consider the local community."

So are we entering a new post-Nimby age? Not according to a recent YouGov survey which found that while 81 per cent of people questioned believe Britain needs more housing, only 50 per cent would welcome more homes in their immediate neighbourhoods – an 8 per cent decrease from 2007.

As a result, the plans will make it easier for a handful of Nimbys to block new homes in rural areas, killing village life and hastening the demise of post offices, schools and pubs, claimed a damning report from the Rural Coalition – made up of landowners, conservationists, and

councils – earlier this year. And social housing organisations and charities are also watching them carefully.

Campbell Robb, chief executive of Shelter, said: "With 1.8 million people on housing waiting lists, millions priced out of the housing market and increasing numbers forced into an insecure private rented sector, a lack of affordable housing is the root cause of our housing crisis. The proposals represent a fundamental shift in the planning of house building in this country. We will be closely monitoring the impact of these changes. However with housing the biggest loser in the recent spending review is it difficult to see how this Bill will be able to significantly impact on our urgent need for more new homes."

The author of *Building Your Own Home*, David Snell, is the country's most prolific self-builder, having built 12 homes over a 30-year period. He argues that the current planning system is worth preserving. "Taken at face value, localism should be a positive word with its connotations of power to the people. But I actually believe in the original concept of planning laws. Before the advent of planning laws, land was only developed for the benefit of those who owned it – and the people who owned it were not ordinary folk, but the blue-blooded and wealthy. The minute planning laws came into existence, land was only developed for the common good.

"Local planning is a cauldron of self-interest. The whole culture of planning at local level is largely negative – building new houses is never popular. The localism of planning is bad news for self-build plans. The fact of the matter is that there are some things that you can't trust to localism. And I know that to be true, for if there was a proposal to develop the land I overlook, I would put my own self-interest and the preservation of my property values first."

Greg Clark intends to overcome objections by ensuring neighbourhoods will get a share of the revenue generated under the new Community Infrastructure Levy – a charge on new homes that all developers have to pay upon being granted planning permission. This has raised the charge that developers will be encouraged to buy-out local objectors. "Local communities are less likely to respond to development proposals on their doorstep with 'over my dead body,' more 'what's it worth?'" says Keith Jenkins from law firm Winckworth Sherwood.

The fact remains, though, that for all the parliamentary to-ing and fro-ing, the success of this Bill will depend on whether the quintessential British Nimby instinct will come to the fore, or something more progressive wins the day. As John Gummer, the former Environment Secretary said: "People who feel that they cannot influence big decisions in a globalised world are adamant that they should control the space around them. It doesn't help to call it Nimby. It is more 'Ideah' – I Decide the Environment Around Here." How very local.