

1. What has the impact been on Essex of the Localism Bill?

The Localism Bill, which became the Localism Act 2011, runs to 495 pages, is divided into ten parts and contains 25 separate schedules. This response therefore focuses on the key areas which best align to the scope of the 'Localism agenda' review defined by Executive Scrutiny Committee.

- i) General Power of Competence (GPC): This is an enabling power, giving Local Authorities the same freedoms as private individuals – i.e. the freedom to do anything that is not otherwise prohibited by law. The impact on Essex has been limited, as ECC had previously been one of the minority of Local Authorities to successfully use the 'wellbeing' powers contained within the Local Government Act 2000. This means that, to date, these new enabling powers have not given additional power to any activity which ECC was already confident it could legally undertake.
- ii) Community Right to Challenge: We have put systems in place to facilitate and process expressions of interest from communities and have created an annual process to fit with our own annual planning cycle. The 'window of opportunity' for expressions of interest to be submitted is currently open, running from March 1st and April 30th 2013. To date, no expressions of interest have been submitted and, while it is possible that there will be a late flurry of submissions when the window closes, this is not anticipated. Indeed, DCLG's own impact assessment suggested that only 300 valid expressions of interest were expected nationally over the next three years.
- iii) Community Right to Bid: The relevant local authority for this part of the legislation is the District/Borough/City Council rather than ECC, although ECC may in future be impacted as a landowner. This has not happened to date and as the District/Borough/City Councils own the process, the impact on the whole of Essex is not known, although it is thought to be minimal at present.
- iv) Community Asset Transfer: ECC has a policy and protocol in place and a process by which communities can engage in dialogue and submit expressions of interest. In the current financial year to date, there have been twelve active Community Asset Transfer processes across the County. These range in maturity from early conversations to business case reviews through to a completed transfer: that of the former Stock Library to the Stock and Buttsbury Heritage Society, which was agreed in February 2013.

More generally, the context for partnership working has changed with the localist ethos emerging from the Coalition Government and indeed our own desire to see individuals and communities empowered and becoming more self sufficient. There have been many positive impacts in Essex: individuals are taking responsibility for commissioning their own care, communities raise money and allocate grants to community projects, volunteers provide services to people across the local community and many young people provide training to adults wanting to use information technology. Essex citizens and communities are already shaping, rather than simply accepting, the provision of public services, and this goes beyond the scope of the Localism Act.

2. How have societies engaged with the Big Society Revenue and Capital Fund? In particular has there been any engagement from societies in urban areas,

given that there is no Parish or Town Council involvement in many of these areas?

As a key element in the Council's broad localism agenda, the main aim of the Big Society Fund (BSF) is to help groups build a stronger civic society and community resilience. The BSF provides funding to local communities to bring a real and lasting benefit to local people by providing better facilities, increasing public participation and citizenship and improving public services. The fund is available to receive applications from community groups, town and parish councils and voluntary organisations who wish to provide an asset of which the local community is in need. Regardless of whether an area is parished or un-parished, funds are evenly distributed, with each city; district and borough area being awarded the same funding for allocation.

Annually to launch the fund, a letter is sent to each town/parish council in Essex, plus each district CVS, as a minimum. The fund is also promoted in the Making the Links magazine and newsletter and in other local media. It is also show-cased at a series funding events throughout the county that are run annually by CVS's. Elected members are made aware of the grant and are involved in promoting the availability of this fund and in seeking out local organisations and signposting them to it. They also attend launch events for successful projects, which acts as an enabler to other groups who are looking to secure funding. The range of techniques employed in promoting the fund helps to ensure that it is widely known among community and voluntary groups beyond Town and Parish Councils.

3. How and where have funds against the two strands (Community Capital and Community Response) been distributed?

Applicants to the BSF initially complete an Expression of Interest Form which is sent to the BSF team. As soon as they are received, Expressions of Interest are entered onto the Monitoring Sheet. The BSF team performs an initial assessment of the project from the information contained in the Expression of Interest. If the team feels the project could be better presented, or is not eligible, they will have a conversation with the applicant to address this.

Internal panel meetings are held on approximately a 4-week basis; membership consists of the Cabinet Member, Deputy Cabinet Member, BSF Manager, Co-ordinator and Administrator. Expressions of Interest are taken to these meetings (the next meeting after the form is received by the BSF team) and are discussed. The panel will decide whether to allocate the project to Community Capital or Community Response or whether to reject the project altogether.

The successful applicants are sent an email advising them which fund their project has been assigned to (or whether it has been rejected), given a reference number (which is also noted on the Monitoring Sheet) and an application form. They are advised that (in the case of the Community Response grant) their application will be considered by the panel at the meeting immediately following receipt of their completed application. In the case of Community Capital, they are advised of the deadlines for receipt of applications and the timescale for the judging panels.

Funding Stream Definitions

Community Capital

This fund is subject to a maximum application of £15,000 for any one project.

It is for capital funding only and eligible areas of expenditure could include, but are not limited to, community, social and recreational facilities, village halls (including church halls), community shops (including general stores and pubs in some circumstances), community transport initiatives (not for a single-use group), land purchases, playground equipment, environmental works and any related feasibility, design and planning work.

Community Response

This fund is subject to a maximum application of £10,000 for any one project.

Eligible projects for this funding are as described for the Community Capital Fund. The difference is that applications for Community Response funding will only be considered where the need is evidenced clearly by the applicant that funding is required for:-

- time critical initiatives
- initiatives that require one-off start-up funding

This fund will not be used to support the on-going running costs of established organisations.

Uniquely for applications made to the community capital funding stream, the allocation from the BSF is not agreed by Essex County Council, but by local people. The judging panels are made up of members of community organisations, including town and parish councils, community and voluntary organisations and youth groups. In this way the County Council is achieving the real delegation of resources and decision making to local communities. County and district councillors attend judging panels as observers, but do not have a vote in the judging process.

The table below sets out an analysis of funding allocations made from the BSF for 2012/2013, as of February 2013, on a city, district and borough basis.

<i>Community Capital</i>					<i>Community Response</i>	
<i>District</i>	<i>No. of Grants</i>	<i>Total Granted</i>	<i>Project Totals</i>	<i>Leverage</i>	<i>No. of Grants</i>	<i>Total Granted</i>
Basildon	5	£56,899	£1,205,893	21.19	2	£16,814
Braintree	12	£109,500	£733,674	6.70	6	£37,455
Brentwood	2	£25,000	£47,108	1.88	0	£0
Castle Point	5	£70,300	£1,160,600	16.51	1	£8,000
Chelmsford	6	£59,428	£354,000	5.96	3	£26,500

Colchester	11	£111,098	£1,056,485	9.51	6	£29,284
Epping Forest	11	£102,630	£1,724,177	16.80	5	28,771
Harlow	7	£36,059	£74,485	2.07	3	£7,568
Maldon	11	£100,003	£232,738	2.33	2	£6,215
Rochford	7	£49,005	£129,960	2.65	1	£3,700
Tendring	8	£77,078	£137,217	1.78	6	£25,663
Uttlesford	12	£106,560	£1,090,078	10.23	3	£8,500
Totals	97	£903,560	£7,946,415	8.79	38	£198,470

4. How are strategic priorities in the localism agenda being identified?

We have an agreed Corporate Vision 2012-2017 which sets an overall vision for ECC along with key priorities and principles to the way we do business. This was agreed following an extensive period of analysis and consultation with over 1200 individuals, groups and organisations, and reflects both an objective analysis of Essex needs and challenges, and the priorities and concerns of our residents. This corporate vision incorporates many localist principles, for instance we have a priority about giving people a greater say and a greater role in building safer and stronger communities and an overarching principle of promoting local decision-making. Ultimately, the localist agenda is an effective way of delivering our priorities in a manner which gives greater choice and freedom to individuals and communities.

The overarching corporate vision and plan provides an agreed framework within which other policies and priorities develop. Further priorities must support the direction articulated in the vision, and, like all priorities agreed by the council, will be underpinned by a sound evidence base, take into account requirements from emerging legislation or guidance, and best practice from elsewhere.

5. Are the different audiences being effectively communicated with?

We communicate with a range of different audiences and partners to ensure that we work as effectively as possible in our localities. The landscape changes so quickly and with such a multiplicity of stakeholders that inevitably there will be improvements we can make at any given time.

District, Borough, City and Parish/Town Councils are all actively communicated with as the democratic tiers of local government in Essex, and these arrangements are expanded in more detail in answer to question 8 below. More recently, our emerging work as a Whole Place Community Budget (WPCB) pilot has seen multiple new opportunities for engagement and communication across the whole public and voluntary sector in Essex, extending beyond simple communication and moving

towards a two-way dialogue. Specific details of effective communication on the BSF programme are also outlined in answer to question 2 above.

As part of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Strategy refresh we have also set-up an internal task and finish group, and are consulting with external partners via the Compact Steering Group and local infrastructure organisations such as CVSS and ECVYS. This approach helps to ensure that different audiences are being effectively communicated with and will help to ensure that our future approach is understood and relevant.

Crucially, each individual Member also has a role to play in ensuring that different audiences in their communities are being effectively communicated with. All Members are currently asked to produce an Annual Report outlining how they have undertaken their role, and this will necessarily include appropriate communication and engagement. Ensuring that Members are well equipped to better achieve this is a crucial element of the planned Induction programme which will commence after the May 2013 election.

At a wider partnership level, Essex Partnership Conferences are designed to be as-and-when conferences when the need arises, allowing a wide range of partners and stakeholders to come together to discuss key issues. For example, two Whole Essex Community Budget (WECB) conferences were held in 2012 to discuss and explore the emerging proposals from the WECB programme. This mechanism still exists to enable a wider group of stakeholders to come together as necessary.

6. How are communities being worked with to build their capacity to deliver local priorities?

There are many initiatives currently operational within Essex County Council designed to support communities in building their capacity to deliver local priorities; they include:-

- the Big Society Fund (responses given to questions 2 and 3 refer)
- the 'Thriving Third Sector' Endowment Fund
- capacity building with local credit unions
- the Essex County Council employee volunteering scheme
- our offer of voluntary secondments from Essex County Council to the voluntary and community sector (VCS)
- the support provided to school governors
- our work to support the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme
- our work to support the Prince's Trust
- the provision of premises for young people's support groups
- the use of former council buildings by voluntary and community groups
- volunteer training for those working with young people
- local intergenerational gardening projects
- intergenerational ICT coaching projects
- engaging young people in voluntary activity
- our on-going work to support time banking
- the promotion of payroll giving

In addition to these examples, the council has recently announced an allocation £1million from ECC's reserves to create a Community Resilience Fund demonstrates ECC's commitment to developing community capacity. The fund is intended to provide long-term, sustainable funding to community and voluntary groups in order to develop community capacity and resilience. It is envisaged that the fund will be politically independent and will operate at community level, with the flexibility to support local, bespoke priorities.

In order to build community capacity even further, one of the key workstreams as part of our Whole Essex Community Budget pilot is on 'strengthening communities'. The aim of the programme is to shift expectations and create different relationships across public, commercial, voluntary and community sectors – managing demand and reducing dependency on services. The workstream is still in the early stages of development rather than an active programme but it seeks to address exactly this issue:

- building independence and resilience rather than creating dependency; helping people to develop solutions that prevent, reduce or delay the need for public sector interventions; encouraging personal responsibility, supporting personal ownership of the issue and the response
- Identifying and supporting reciprocity – people helping each other; passing it on; paying it back
- Building long-term sustainability into community responses
- Identifying existing infrastructure and building on it where it exists, supporting creation of new approaches only where it doesn't

As part of this workstream we are also refreshing our Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy. The strategy aims to design a 'framework' approach for the county, which will create and support the enabling conditions for stronger, more resilient communities. A key element of this work is to encourage local communities to take ownership of local issues and problems and determine their own solutions, thereby devolving decision-making and resource allocation to the community-level.

7. How are Members and officers being equipped to deliver the localism agenda?

The Member Development Steering Group is actively involved in ensuring the Member Induction & Development programme meets the current and future needs of elected members. Working locally is fundamental to the role of a divisional member and is therefore covered across range of different sessions, for instance on working with communities and the public service landscape & partnerships. This programme will be launched after the May election, giving all Members opportunity to learn or to refresh their skills. There is no specific 'localism agenda' topic, as the localist approach is an enabler rather than an end in itself, as previously outlined in the response to question 4 above.

In addition to the forthcoming induction programme, the Member development programme also incorporates aspects of localism and provides tools to support members in this role. For instance, there has recently been a session available to all

Members on 'Essex Insight', which is a tool which can support Members to find detailed information about the area they represent.

ECC also has a comprehensive development programme for members. Our Performance Management approach gives opportunity for employees and managers to highlight any areas where further development may be beneficial. Our Transformation Programme also seeks culture change, ensuring that we do not simply seek to change the community response, but recognise that ECC behaviours need to change too.

The strengthening communities workstream outlined above also embraces this notion, looking not just to ECC officers to change their behaviour, but more widely across the whole public sector. It is exploring how this can be achieved, so that those working in the sector:

- support and encourage the expectation that people can and will resolve their own issues; understanding that they will achieve better outcomes by doing so;
- look to the community first, rather than create or commission a public sector response or 'service' by default; and
- build consideration of the community contribution into all aspects of their work so that the best use is always made of community assets across all other aspects of public sector delivery.

8. How is the County engaging with District/Borough/City Councils, and Parish and Town Councils to take forward the localism agenda?

The Making the Links bulletin is sent out to all town and parish councils at the end of every month. The bulletin includes regular contributions from various areas of the County Council such as Libraries, Planning, Waste and Recycling etc. The bulletin also regularly promotes the Big Society Fund and any other funding opportunities that may be of interest to communities. In between the monthly bulletin, additional emails are sent at the request of various departments, most recently to include the promotion of the Essex BDUK Project - Making the Connection Campaign.

In partnership with Cambridge Open Systems (essexinfo.net) we continue to provide free website hosting, training and technical support for town and parish councils (including voluntary groups and other organisations), this will be developed further in the coming year to include small businesses.

The Essex Clerks Bursary (total of £5k per year) is available for small to medium sized councils for clerks training to enable parish councils to achieve Quality Status and to become eligible to use the General Power of Competence (Localism Act 2011 S.1-8). The lead officer for Making the Links is a qualified parish clerk and also the lead trainer for Essex Equals, a fast track mentoring service for the clerks qualification, the Certificate in Local Council Administration (CiLCA). Essex currently has the highest national first time pass rate and the highest number of qualified parish and town clerks, one of the criteria for both Quality Status and the General Power of Competence.

Support, including financial support (total of £18k per year) also continues for the production of parish plans.

To support effective locality working with District/Borough/City Councils, we currently offer the opportunity for those partners to work with us on a two-tier Locality Board. Seven of the twelve Districts currently participate and this provides a useful avenue for two-way communication and debate. In Districts where there is currently not a locality board, there is often an active Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and this can provide some opportunity for local engagement, although these LSPs do not usually include all divisional members.

Locality Boards have been established for up to a year in some Districts and a review of locality working including a review of Locality Boards is currently underway. Among other things, this seeks to explore how Locality Boards can be more effective in ensuring that the Localism agenda is pursued across the county, and not just in the seven Districts who currently operate a two-tier board. This review is also exploring our internal arrangements for supporting locality working, to ensure that we are coordinating our partnership arrangements in the most effective and efficient manner.

9. How are the Locality Boards and the Essex Partnership Forum performing?

Locality Boards at present are informal boards which are established and operating through consensus and local choice. As a consequence, they vary in their terms of reference and what they aim to achieve, so formal performance measures are not currently reported. Where they are operating, they are well attended by both tiers of local government, indicating that the attendees find them useful. They have proved to be extremely useful for getting consensus on key issues of local concern, generating debate and suggested solutions.

Where there has been consensus on these issues across a Locality Board, this has enabled particularly powerful dialogue with decision makers. For instance, the Basildon Locality Board has held an Education Summit to discuss and agree a way forward on local education provision/standards; the Maldon Locality Board has championed the issue of hospital facilities for the Maldon District. Some Locality Boards are still in the process of maturing, but they are increasingly gathering pace and identifying mutual local priorities for action.

Following a review of Partnership working in 2011, the Essex Partnership Forum (EPF) ceased to meet. The EPF's role was to engage a wider group of stakeholders in the decisions taken by the Essex Management Board (EMB). However, following the ending of the Local Area Agreement (LAA) and the removal of the statutory duty to prepare a new one, the EMB, and hence the EPF, became redundant. Instead, a wider forum of stakeholders meets as the Essex Partnership Conference whenever the need arises. This is outlined in more detail in answer to question 5.