

# West Midlands Surveyor

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## Can Localism answer our need for Affordable Homes?

**In August 2011 my company bought three acres of grazing land on the edge of Newport in Shropshire. The Coalition had just come into power and something called 'localism' was the new 'buzz word'.**

Our land lay outside the settlement boundary and so any development would be contrary to planning policy. However my fellow directors and I believed we might be able to persuade the planning authority to consider the land to be an 'exception' site if we proposed a scheme comprising 50% affordable homes to be funded from the profits of the open-market housing. The key to this would be to prove a housing need and the suitability of the site for development and to gain 'local' support for the proposals.

Housing need was apparent with two hundred applicants for every affordable family house becoming available. An extensive suite of reports and surveys supported the suitability of the site for the development of thirty homes, the difficulty would be in gaining local support.

Whilst details of the Coalition Government's austerity measures had not yet been announced, it was apparent from discussions with the Homes and Communities Agency that cutbacks to social housing grant funding would be significant. Therefore an innovative solution was needed to deliver affordable homes without grant.

Having gained positive feedback from planning and housing officers and the appropriate cabinet member at Telford and Wrekin Council, we then embraced localism and held a two day public consultation event. It was at this point that I realised Localism has the potential to slow and maybe even hinder innovative solutions as we received little support for our proposals.

Whilst the Decentralisation Minister Greg Clark may have summed up the Localism Bill in January 2011 when he said "Our aim is to give people real choice, real influence and reasons to say 'yes' to development", our experience of the public consultation event was that localism could provide a platform for people to say 'no'!

Whilst a 'No' from those in the immediate vicinity of the proposed development was not wholly unexpected we expected the local Town Council to take a wider, community view. Indeed, during the public consultation, one Town Councillor noted that as well as listening to the concerns of immediate neighbours he had to be mindful of the shortage of affordable housing in the town and the benefits such a scheme would deliver to the wider Newport community. Nevertheless the Town Council recommended refusal of the proposals.

It is clear that the Government's view is that localism should work to promote rather than hinder growth. Paragraph 2.16 of the Plan for Growth confirms "The Government has

*already set out its plans to provide an opportunity for neighbourhoods to put forward plans for development. Neighbourhood plans will be able to shape development, but not to block it".*

Well, despite local objection the planning committee of Telford and Wrekin Council decided that the

housing needs of Newport outweighed the policy presumptions against development and accordingly granted planning consent on 3<sup>rd</sup> August.

Having been granted planning permission, Nicola Marshall, Head Midlands West, Homes and Communities Agency commented: "This project is commendable for finding a different way to deliver a viable development and could well provide lessons for other similar schemes".

So can localism answer our need for Affordable Homes? I believe with open dialogue, a proven need and some dogged determination it may just be possible.

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