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Communities in control: a local democracy laboratory

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A Government policy announced without fanfare just before Christmas potentially has implications for everyone working to enhance local democracy and empower local decision-making, writes Roy Payne, executive director of [GDFWatch](#).

The new policy, called [Working With Communities](#), provides a framework – and more critically, the funding – to help communities exert more influence over, and be more involved in, long-term social, environmental and economic planning in their area.

Although created to support delivery of a major nationally-significant energy infrastructure programme, the new policy is effectively a huge social infrastructure change project.

It establishes a new and unique Community Partnership framework designed to proactively find pragmatic solutions to some fundamental issues of community representation and engagement. For example, how do we best:

- plan for, and over, the long-term without the distractions of the electoral cycle and the short-term decision-making it drives?
- give local people influence over the delivery of the UK's national contribution to solving a global environmental issue?
- create an effective working partnership, and rebalance power, between communities and their local government?
- contact and involve those hard-to-reach groups within a community whose voice is not always heard?

The Government has also made significant commitments to fund a wide range of activities, including:

- a central secretariat to professionally support the new Community Partnerships
- the acquisition of independent expert skills and knowledge to advise and support the community, to more effectively challenge government assumptions
- socioeconomic analysis, to create a 'vision' document that sets out the community's long-term social, environmental and economic ambitions
- outreach and engagement activity, to ensure even hard-to-reach groups are involved in deliberation and decision-making processes

The policy framework and funding might be in place, but the project currently lacks any flesh for these barebone principles. That's where the localism, local wealth creation, local democracy and community development sectors might now have a role to play.

Cynics will observe this all seems too good to be true. To be sure, there are inevitable caveats. But what makes this policy different from anything that has gone before, and why it might pique the sector's interest, is that the Government requires a community's 'consent' throughout this process.

Let that sink in for a moment. The Government requires your consent. You can walk away, without obligation, at any time. That changes the whole negotiating and power-balance dynamic. It provides the community sector with new and unique leverage to secure an equitable and *meaningful* partnership with central and local governments.

So, what are the caveats and constraints? First of all, over the 10-30 year lifecycle of the project, it is likely that no more than 10-12 areas will be involved. Any area in the country could be involved, but only a handful are likely to be actually involved. This offers the opportunity to create 'mega pilot projects' in which new ideas and techniques around community participation and empowerment can be trialled and evaluated. The lessons learned applied to other areas of public policy. The evidence built to show central government that local people can be trusted with decision-making responsibilities.

But the biggest hurdle is the subject matter. Nuclear waste. The international scientific consensus, on a par with that behind climate change, is that every country needs to build a specialised facility deep underground. The international political consensus is that any site must have the approval of the local community. These are huge projects. The UK's facility is likely to cost around £20 billion, with an operating life in excess of 150 years. Wherever it is sited it will have profound long-term implications for the surrounding communities and economy.

Finland, France, Sweden, [Switzerland and Canada](#) are all well ahead of us in securing community consent to build such a facility. The UK has learned from their experiences. The requirement to gain a community's consent is the driving force behind the *Working With Communities* policy. It is a radical and new approach in the UK to how communities can shape and determine infrastructure projects. But the principles of 'consent', and experience learned from direct community involvement, could be applied across a wide range of public policy challenges.

We live in the most centralised 'democracy' in Europe. Despite paying lip-service to devolved decision-making, Westminster does not yield power easily. The Government have been required to introduce the 'community consent' principle because it is international best practice. The consent principle offers a foot in the door to wider local democracy reform, if we can show Government hard evidence that people can actually be trusted to evaluate complex issues and make pragmatic decisions.

Rebalancing power and bringing decision-making closer to those affected is one of the key challenges we face as we look to a society beyond Brexit. Nuclear waste may not be the issue you would choose to engage with. But if we are to develop new and more democratic ways to govern our affairs in the 21st Century, perhaps resolving one of our 'dirtiest' intergenerational problems is the best place to start.

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