

Localism – the changing face of London

Nearly three months on from the introduction of the Localism Act and its time to take stock of progress in the capital. Robert Gordon Clark reports

In this article I look at the emergence of Neighbourhood Fora (NFs) and Parish Councils (PCs) and the core differences between them; and the emergence of other agencies and opportunities at a local level in London.

The emergence of NFs and PCs and the core differences between them

One of the most significant changes to local government in London has been the introduction of Neighbourhood Forums (NFs). So far the emergence of budding NFs has been slow. Of the 233 front runners announced by government during last year, 14 of them are in London – these are Sudbury Town (Brent), Kentish Town (Camden), Ealing Town Centre and West Ealing (Ealing), Edmonton (Enfield), Stamford Hill (Hackney), Markham Square and Norland (Kensington & Chelsea), South Bank (Lambeth), Bermondsey and Bankside (Southwark), Hackbridge (Sutton), Highams Park and Leytonstone (Waltham Forest).

Each of the local authorities in which these frontrunners are located has been given up to £20,000¹ to help take this forward. But other emerging NFs are starting to pop up all over London too. In Camden alone, 15 local groups have reportedly engaged with the local council on potentially setting up NFs in places including King's Cross, Kentish Town, Dartmouth Park and Highgate.

Given these developments, the process to create a NF is worth reiterating. It is relatively straightforward. First, the area needs to be defined and we would expect most to be co-terminous with council ward boundaries, although there is nothing in theory to say they cannot be and one already proposed covers parts of Hammersmith and Fulham and neighbouring Kensington and Chelsea.

Then within this area 21 signatories are needed. After that the Council has to consult on the proposed area before moving forward to a referendum for the people living in the area.

The other alternative for a local area is to create a Parish Council. In London these were abolished in 1963 as part of the re-organisation of local government in the capital. But in 2007 an oddly named Act of Parliament – the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act, 2007² – allowed for Parish Councils to be established in places like London again.

For this to go ahead, the local authority would need to give its consent for a referendum on the creation of a PC and then confirm this, should a majority of residents vote in favour.

Today only one part of London, Westminster's Queen's Park, has seen progress in this area. The referendum amongst the 8,000 residents on the establishment of a Parish Council took place between 9 and 25 May 2012 over the course of three weeks. Interestingly and perhaps disappointingly only 20% of residents voted.

The result was declared on 28 May with 1,100 in favour

and 508 against. Westminster City Council still needs to ratify the decision but is expected to do so imminently.

But what is the difference between a NF and a PC? Well put simply the former mainly has a planning brief, whilst the latter has the ability to raise a local tax which it can spend on what it likes. What is perhaps interesting about Queen's Park is that it has one of the highest Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) claimant rates in Westminster and London. This means that the local tax would not be paid by them, but by those residents in work.

With regard to NFs, there are perhaps three main planning issues to watch. These are Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDPs), Assets of Community Value (ACVs) and Community Right to Build Orders (CRBOs).

Initial focus amongst NFs seems to be mainly on working towards the creation of a NDP. The steps here are again in the-ory quite straightforward:

The NF prepares the NDP

The authority carries out a "light touch" review by an Independent Inspector to check that the plan has paid sufficient regard to the Local Plan, the London Plan and relevant national policies

The NF then needs to get over 50% support for the plan from those who vote in a referendum on the NDP

Then the NDP is adopted as part of the local plan.

An important message from government here has been the need for consistency between NDPs and Local Plans, which will be worth assessing when these plans finally do emerge.

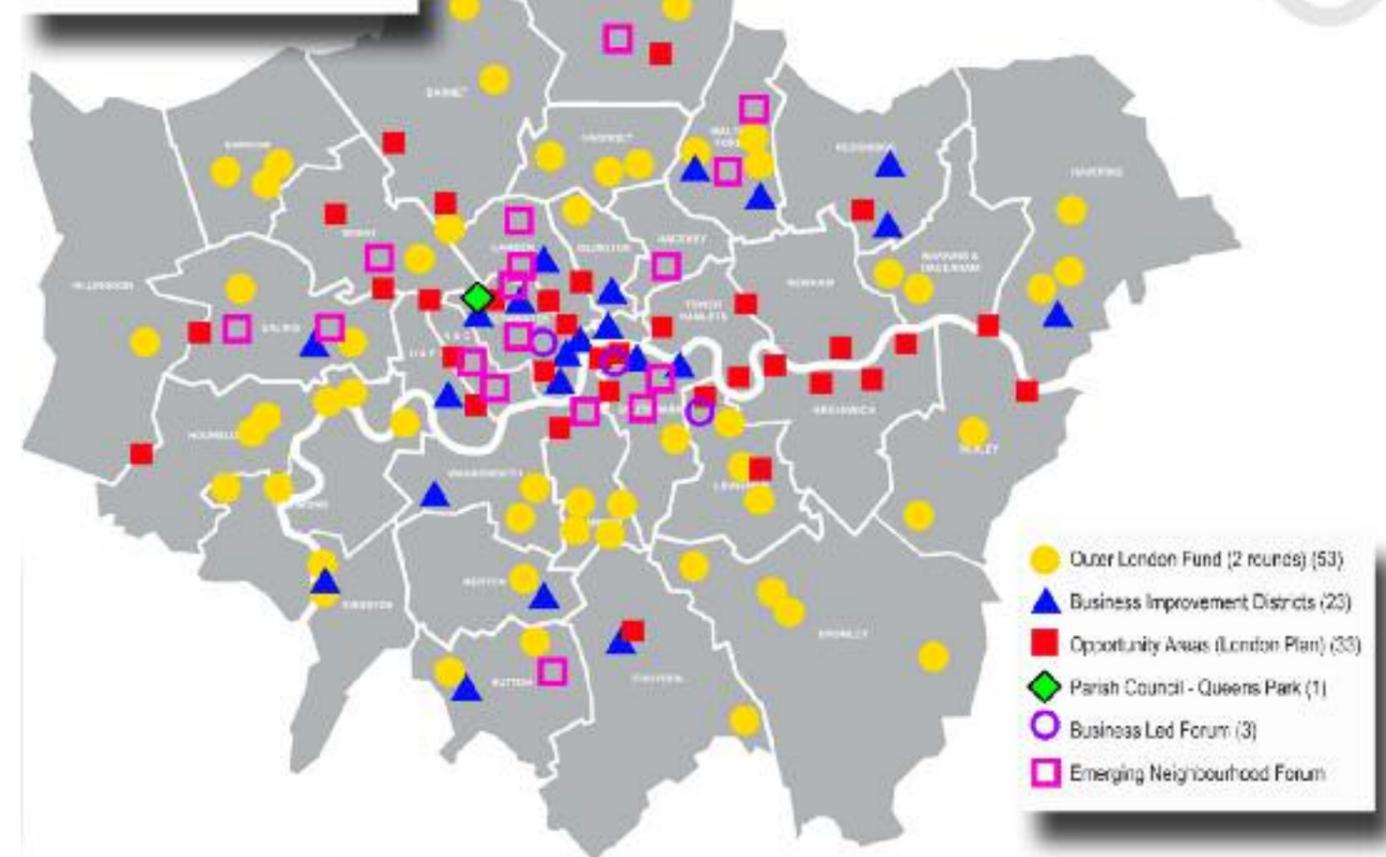
NFs also have the opportunity to lobby the relevant Council to protect what are called Assets of Community Value. Every authority or council now has to prepare an annual List of Assets of Community Value. The general understanding here is that if an asset on the list comes up for sale, whether freehold or leasehold, whether privately or publicly owned, the community will be given time to raise the funds to try to acquire it.

These could of course be used by groups seeking to stifle development, for example if a significant building or open space within a development area were added to the list. We may well see NFs and local people campaigning for certain spaces and places to be on the list (they have no right to list assets themselves) which could mean it will become harder to buy, sell and plan for development if a site is on the list.

A more positive power is the Community Right to Build Orders which will apply if over 50% of people vote in favour of a development proposal promoted by the community. At present there does not appear to be a cap on the scale of the development involved, so these could be quite large, although CLG is suggesting that this would apply for relatively small scale developments, and ones where the benefits from the development are very much retained in the community.

This is perhaps one area of the Act that is potentially both

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exciting and different and will also encourage people to get involved in response to a proposal as: "Do you want to support a new community centre on the high street?"

The emergence of other agencies and opportunities at a local level in London

The map below has been produced by us to depict the changes occurring in London at the moment.

Since the late 1990s Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) have been in effect and there are now over 20 in the capital ranging from retail and regeneration focussed organisations – such as the New West End Company and Victoria BID in Central London – to more employment and industrial orientated BIDs like London Riverside in Rainham and Hainault in Redbridge. Although business-led, they provide a useful and tangible example of local economics, based on a tax raising power.

Alongside these we have the Mayor's first two tranches of Outer London Fund money which were granted before the Mayoral election in May. The levels of grant vary from £60,400 (North Harrow) to just over £2m for Kingston Town Centre (excepting Croydon and Tottenham which both got seven fig-

ure sums from a regeneration fund established following the riots). These grants are galvanising local areas, especially town centres to work closely with the local authority (which made the applications) to access this money. Could we see more NFs spring from this work?

And finally we have the Opportunity Areas identified in the Mayor's London Plan. These are seen as places where development and investment should be encouraged and here again you have 33 across London.

From this eclectic mixture of localism in practice (not including a single NF or PC) the tally already soars to over 80 areas of focus, whether they are business, borough or town centre led.

Assuming we will see two or three NFs per borough in the coming year, we have a tally of well over 100 different groups working on the localism agenda. It is one hell of an experiment for the capital. How development and regeneration are delivered in the future will be fascinating to watch. ■

¹ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/planningsystem/neighbourhoodplanningvanguards/>
² <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2007/28/contents>



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