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### Conservative Planning Policy - New Localism

With the election looming, the question needs to be asked what might a future Conservative Party Government do to the planning system if elected? There are now some very clear indications emerging from the Conservative Party as to what it considers to be done.

Merits of local control have long been espoused by philosophers/political theorists - most notably Ernest Shumacher's "*Small is beautiful*" ethos.

It is not unusual for opposition parties to espouse its merits when general elections are imminent; Conservative Party policy papers point out that the 1997 Labour Party Manifesto did just that!

A consistent theme is the Conservative's view of the need to remove what it sees as too much Central Government interference into what should essentially be local planning issues determined by the local community.

However, David Cameron has translated this philosophy in the Conservative Party document published in February 2009 entitled "Control Shift." This document theme is the importance of the empowering state rather than the "overpowering state."

In introducing this document David Cameron states that:

*"Decentralisation, devolution and empowerment are naturally part of a Conservative approach to government. 'Control Shift', our decentralisation green paper, outlines a series of policies that will see powers transferred from the central state to local people and local institutions"*

The document proposes the following planning related measures:

- Abolishing all regional planning and housing

powers exercised by regional government, returning powers and discretion back to local communities

- Creating bottom-up incentives for house building, by allowing councils to benefit more from the increase in council tax revenues from new homes, rather than being equalised away by Whitehall
- Allowing councils to establish their own local enterprise partnerships to take over the economic development functions and funding of the Regional Development Agencies
- Giving local authorities a new discretionary power to levy business rate discounts, allowing them to help local shops and services, such as rural pubs or post offices
- Provide citizens in all large cities with the opportunity to choose whether to have an elected mayor, through mayoral referendums
- Greater use of direct democracy, including allowing residents to veto high council tax rises, and instigating local referendums on local issues
- Requiring councils to publish detailed information online on expenditure by local councils - including the pay and perks of senior staff, and issuing new guidance to stop 'rewards for failure' to sacked town hall staff.

The zeal to which this approach is now being taken - even before the Conservatives are in Government - was exemplified by the Shadow Home Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government - Caroline Spelman - in her letter to remind Conservative councillors that, if elected, the Conservative Party will abolish Regional Spatial Strategies and other quangos set up by Labour. Moreover her advice was to:

*"Put further progress on the Local Development Framework work on ice until the general election, when it involves controversial elements of the Regional Spatial Strategy(RSS), particularly Green Belt Reviews"*

This advice of not having to provide the large

housing numbers to be delivered in each District as espoused by the RSS, is therefore clearly aimed at Conservative controlled Councils - especially in the Home Counties.

To replace the regional spatial strategy and to give a regional dimension, on the Conservative agenda is the resurrection of the County Council's strategic planning role - who unlike the Regional Assemblies - have elected councillors.

In a similar vein, shadow Conservative Planning Minister, Bob Neil, promises to abolish the Infrastructure Planning Commission (IPC) which, as from the 1 October, is now charged with determining planning applications for major infrastructure projects - such as power stations, major roads, ports and airports. (See our separate bulletin on the IPC). Speaking about the newly established IPC, Bob Neil, the Shadow Conservative Planning Minister said that:

*"the people and their representatives are being disenfranchised on a massive scale by the most unaccountable quangocrats ever created."*

Conservative planning policy is also seeking to use financial incentives to replace housing targets as a means of securing housing delivery.

At the Conservative Party Conference in October 2009, Shadow Housing Minister Grant Shapps' speech entitled "Creating a Nation of Housebuilders" said about Labour Housing Policy:

*"12 years in power, 10 housing related acts of parliament, 9 housing ministers - and yet fewer houses built at any time since the second world war."*

Shapps added:

*"This country needs more homes. But we know that the top down, Soviet style, Labour approach to housing just isn't working."*

If elected, the Conservatives will abolish the housing targets set by the Regional Spatial Strategy - to be replaced with community incentives to build - when the community builds more homes the Conservatives will match pound for pound the extra money that the area gets through Council tax for 6 years to help pay for necessary infrastructure.

It is also likely that Shapps would abolish the Homes and Community Agency (HCA) because it is claimed to have achieved relatively "little delivery on the ground" despite it spending "£4.5million a month on salaries with 20 offices up and down the country." It is also proposed to establish Local Housing Trusts

where local communities can expand their villages by up to 10% over 10 years and to abolish higher housing density targets, which are claimed to be leading to more flats and less family homes.

## Commentary

It is early days and the political rhetoric relating to the planning system needs to be translated into detail. This is exemplified in relation to the delivery of new homes.

Some mechanism is needed to implement the housing delivery of more family homes at lower densities - with the associated impact on development outside current settlement boundaries - including possibly the Green Belt.

However, it is also hard to see how a financial incentive will work. Local residents will still object - as we all do - because of fears of more disturbance - particularly traffic.

The controversial elements of the Regional Spatial Strategy actually are not needed for pursuing current development programmes. They relate to longer term and larger scale schemes. We can get on with the job of climbing out of the recession and increasing housing supply in the short term by using the current stock of planning permissions and pursuing more development on urban brownfield sites. However this approach will not deliver the substantial shift from flats to houses sought by the Conservative Party.

If taken to extremes, the localism approach could result in a major vacuum in strategic policy by the end of 2010. Ironically, the revival of the old style "County Structure Plan" would seem to be consistent with the localism agenda although to date the Conservatives have not signalled that the County's would have a strategic planning role. What seems more likely is an grouping of the region's Local Authorities to agree the regional strategic planning context.

The housebuilding industry is already questioning the Conservative "localism agenda." Stewart Baseley, chairman of the Home Builders Federation, has said that the Conservative's pledge, if elected, to scrap regional spatial strategies and regional housing targets with a bottom-up approach involving incentives to councils to allow more homes was "problematic."

*"Making such significant changes now, at the back end of the worst recession in living memory, is a high-risk strategy." We must ensure that every local authority produces in a timely fashion a local plan that adequately provides for need in their area. The Government must ensure that the sum of those local*

*plans adds up to a number that is adequate for the nation's housing requirements. And it must ensure that the local plans are implemented."*

The Conservatives are now proposing to give further details of their proposed planning measures in their housing and regeneration policy paper to be published before Christmas.

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