**Localism and the Environment: A critical review of UK Government localism strategy 2010-2015**

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# Abstract

From 2010-2015 the UK coalition government sought to reduce the influence of central government and follow a strategy of localism. Devolution, bringing people closer to democratic process and strengthening communities, became a key point of emphasis. The belief was that localism and devolution would empower socially, help instigate economic innovation and lead to the establishment of greener, more environmentally conscious behaviour. The findings of this paper challenge this rationale. Through an analysis of Community Energy policy (CE) this paper highlights how the strategy of localism that emerged during the coalition government’s tenure, did not allow pro-environmental schemes, such as CE, to flourish. The significant scaling back of state funding and structure, which became a feature of the coalition government’s approach to localism, restricts the ability and desire for communities to positively affect their surroundings. It is the recommendation of this paper that future governments should look to emerging ‘eco-localism’ literature, and establish a model of localism that moves away from existing neoliberal perspectives of governance.

**Keywords**

Localism, community energy, neoliberalism, energy policy

# 1. Introduction

One of the key policy aims to emerge from the 2010 coalition government was a pledge to better devolve and decentralise Westminster’s perceived disproportionate influence over the UK. This move to transition power back into people’s hands was coined at the time ‘The Big Society’ (Dillon, et al., 2011), a nod to traditional 19th century ‘One Nation Conservatism’. Greater powers and decision making were to be given to local government and thus, in theory, communities and individuals would benefit from being more involved with the political process. In 2011 the ‘Localism Act’ was passed.

This desire for comprehensive devolution represented a substantial change in approach from that of the previous, New Labour, government. From 1997-2010 successive New Labour governments developed a highly centralised style of governance, a style drawing many parallels to that of early Conservative Thatcherism (Hickson, 2013, Lodge & Muir, 2011). New Labour were *‘cautious’* (Lodge & Muir, 2011, p98) to move towards full devolution or a strategy of localism. In fact their style of governance can be better described as a form of ‘New Regionalism’ (Quinn, 2013). The establishment of, for example, the nine Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) under New Labour was testament to a reluctance to cede significant central control. It has been suggested that from inception, the success RDAs would have been able to achieve was *‘limited’*, due in large part to their rigid structure, an overbearing economic focus and they were *‘directed by Whitehall’* (Roberts & Benneworth, 2001, p143)*.* During this period New Labour’s economic direction was heavily influenced by ‘new growth theory’ (Kreiger, 2007). It was the belief that embracing globalisation and many neoliberal principles could lead to a strong, yet stable, form of economic growth. Growth which would help to fund a stronger welfare state, aid social mobility and reduce poverty. As former New Labour cabinet member John Denham stated, the vision at the time was centered on allowing significant market freedom with the hope that it will create a ‘*considerable amount of wealth that you can redirect, either in terms of raising family incomes or funding public services.’* (Denham, 2011, p47).

It was, however, this openness and acceptance of globalisation and market freedom that would prove to be damaging. When in 2008 global markets crashed, so too did New Labour’s model for success. In short New Labour had not ‘*achieved the balance between fairness and efficiency it promised’* (Krieger, 2007, p430). The result was a strong public desire to recapture greater political control.

The overriding theme of the Localism Act is of de-regulation and community. The act proposed that *‘new freedoms and flexibility’* (DCLG, 2011, p18) would be given to local government, removing *‘constraints’* and *‘restrictions’* (DCLG, 2011, p4) that were present under the previous Labour government. The act stated it would give communities the right to veto excessive taxes, challenge local government and a right for communities to protect and better control assets in their locality (DCLG, 2011).

The Localism Act in writing has a solely social and economic focus. This does not mean that the coalition government did not envisage localism playing a large role in mitigating climate change and protecting the environment. In a speech to civil servants in 2010, Prime Minister David Cameron declared he wanted to establish the *‘greenest government ever’* (Guardian, 2010). Furthermore Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party Sarah Newton described localism as *‘the cornerstone of environmentalism in the 21st century’* (Guardian, 2013). In 2011 the UK government published a ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ (MOU) (DECC, 2011a) between local government and the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC). A large proportion of the effort to tackle climate change would be devolved *‘through local governance’* (DECC, 2011a). The MOU stipulated a *‘partnership approach to helping meet climate change mitigation and related objectives’* (DECC, 2011a, p4).

This paper, by examining relevant academic literature and official documents, will seek to determine the extent to which this locaslism approach to mitigating climate change and environmentally damaging issues was effective. The focus on determining effectiveness will center on the extent to which tangible progress has been made in establishing pro-environmental policy. First we set out the origins of the term localism and highlight the varied academic perspectives, note the tradition of localism both politically and socially in the UK, and determine why localism has become such a dominant word in political discourse in recent years. We use this to frame the nature of the localism strategy that has emerged during the tenure of the coalition government. We then discuss community energy policy to provide an insight into positive environmental progress in the localism strategy. Finally we provide some conclusions.

# 2. Localism in context

Although certain areas of the localism rhetoric represented an emergence of a new philosophy in British politics (especially regarding self determination of energy and environmental stewardship), at its core it was merely a progression of sentiment that has existed for quite some time. Clarke & Cochrane (2013, p11) describe localism as *‘a continuing and inescapable feature of British politics’*. An *‘anti state’* (Holman & Rydin, 2013, p2) agenda has historically shaped the Liberal and Conservative parties for centuries. Even with the growth of urban life in the 19th and 20th centuries, a sense of local community and neighbourhood, moulded society well into the 21st century. Cragoe (2007), cited in Clarke & Cochrane (2013, p11), write of a *‘local patriotism’* that once defined the narrative and direction of dominant political and social thought in the United Kingdom. Although localism itself is a relatively new entry into the English lexicon, it defines a way of thinking, that until relatively recently, reflected the norm. Socially and politically, a local outlook began to fade with the growth of communication and infrastructure in the latter half of the 21st century. The rise of the computer and internet in the last few decades particularly, has only helped to catalyse the process. Globalisation is in many ways the antithesis of localism. It is the economic, social and political development of an increasingly internationally connected world. It has helped lead to the erosion of the traditional social and political norms of locality (Stein, 2002). When business, education and social interactions can be maintained and developed online, the traditional, tangible need for a society structured around mutual interdependence dissipates. For decades the growth of globalism, and the neoliberal theories that underpinned it, have faced little challenge. O’Hara (2005, p342) writes;

*‘Neoliberal globalisation or globalised neoliberalism is so dominant that texts often present such policies as gospel rather than as perspectives on governance that are subject to debate and analysis.’*

However, in recent years opinions of globalisation are changing. There is a re-emergence of localism and a growing challenge of globalisation present in the literature (see for example, Catney et al., 2014). The growth in popularity of localism can be attributed in part to an ideological retaliation to some of the effects of globalisation (Woodin & Lucas, 2004). Hess (2008, p625) describes localism as *‘a movement to regain sovereignty over the local economy in an era of globalization’*. He, like others in the literature, argue that localism has gained traction due to increased concerns of corporate control and a realisation that globalised markets are vulnerable (Hess, 2008, Woodin & Lucas, 2004, O’Hara, 2005). Sanchez (2010) goes further and argues that globalisation has led to the loss of societal and individual identity. She talks of the loss of cultural referents and it leading to *‘widespread feeling of an existential vacuum’* (Sanchez, 2010, p72). Although often understood as an economic phenomenon, globalisation has a substantial social impact. The international sharing of ideas educates and liberalises but also homogenises, as national and sub-national identities are replaced by global norms. At all levels then, social, economic and political, the appeal of localism is that it may provide the key to recapturing a sense of control.

Localism is a broad term that has been used in many different fields and contexts. There are many in the literature who try to hone, differentiate and give the word greater context (Hickson, 2013, Evans et al., 2013, Skerratt, 2013, Bradley, 2014). Gregg (2003) introduces the concepts of ‘parochial’ and ‘enlightened’ localism. Looking at societal norms, Gregg (2003) surmises that localism can be grouped into two camps. In both parochial and enlightened localism, the concept is fundamentally the rejection of globalised, trans-national forces in favour of devolved, community oriented societal structure. What Gregg (2003) explains is that a community’s desire for localism can emanate from two very different positions. Parochial localism is a viewpoint that is rooted in a distrust of outside forces permeating the status quo of a locality. The source of this viewpoint however is almost always due to a lack of education, understanding and experience of the wider world. Enlightened localism then, as Gregg (2003) defines it, is a reasoned choice, based off the very fundamental elements those who follow a parochial notion of localism lack. Where parochial localism is fuelled by fear of the unknown enlightened localism is an informed realisation that there are a great many merits in a broken down, community centrered society. Where Gregg (2003) separates localism as consequences of societal nurture, for Davoudi and Madanipour (2015), the way in which localism is perceived and shaped, is largely due to its socio-economic and environmental contexts.

Davoudi and Madanipour (2015, p1) write of the *‘different domains’* in which localism plays an important role. They highlight how in these *‘*domains’, perspectives of localism shift. For example in economics, localism is a process that seeks to reverse some of what has been lost through globalisation. There is a focus on *‘locally owned businesses, using local resources, employing local workers and serving local consumers’* (Davoudi & Madanipour, 2015, p1). The political perspective of localism concentrates much more on the process of democratisation. The shift of central power through a process of devolution to local communities, grass roots organisations and councils (Davoudi & Madanipour, 2015). Finally Davoudi and Madanipour (2015) write of the environmental perspective of localism and note how localism from this perspective is widely seen as the most effective path to achieving true sustainability. They state how, *‘some argue that downscaling activities and local self-sufficiency is seen as necessary for reversing the ecological crisis’* (Davoudi & Madanipour, 2015, p2). What both Gregg (2003) and Davoudi and Madanipour (2015) help to highlight is that localism is conceptually very fluid and holistic. It’s emergence into culture, its understanding and the way in which it is practised is a product of a myriad of external factors.

Hickson (2013) and Evans et al. (2013) refer to the ‘localist turn’ in British politics of the last decade and a half. As mentioned above, Hickson (2013) and Evans et al. (2013) note that localism isn’t a new phenomenon in the UK. However, Hickson (2013) stresses that the extent to which it has become a focus of all three of the major parties, and the way in which local community has come to define the narrative, is a departure from the norm. Hildreth (2011) developed a framework exploring the relationships between central government, local government and communities, which includes three models of ‘managerial’, ‘representative’ and ‘community’ localism. Evans et al. (2013) explores in depth what is meant by Hildreth’s three models. Managerial localism can be simply understood as centrally administered localism. Within this system Evans et al. (2013, p402) note how relative local freedom is somewhat constrained as conditions and targets are set under a *‘strict regulatory framework’*. Representative localism is perhaps then the next step. Decision making and co-ordination is still in governmental hands, but rather than directed centrally, it is devolved to local government (Evans et al., 2013). Finally community localism is defined as, *‘devolution of rights and support directly to citizens in communities to allow them to engage in decisions and action’* (Evans et al., 2013, p403).

A number of voices within the literature feel that the coalition government’s localist agenda and Big Society ideology fall within the community model of localism. Westwood (2011) writes that the coalition government drew heavily from existing work on the theory of social capital. At its core social capital is the idea that communities are formed by the interaction of individuals. Although social capital is a theory that seeks to understand the formation and structure of social networks, within the theory there remains an embedded and fundamental clash between the opposing positions of individualism and community. Pawar (2006) asserts that social capital as a concept is held back by its wording. The words social and capital in isolation present two very different perspectives. Even used in a different context, the word capital is too closely associated with the economics of capitalism, wealth creation, and an intrinsic concept of possession. Pawar (2006, p211) writes of social capital that, *‘the phrase does not fit the phenomenon it tries to explain’.* Social capital is a very popular and influential theory within the localist narrative - the dichotomy that Pawar (2006) highlights leaves it open to broad interpretation. As a result western governments, like the UK, have been able to adapt social capital principles to match their political outlook and goals. Writing about social capital Westwood (2011, p691) states that;

‘*It is a self-reinforcing web of individual and collective actions, playing firmly to Cameron’s desire for greater levels of individual autonomy and responsibility, and to his ideological desire for smaller government’.*

The coalition government’s Big Society vision was built on the idea of lessening central government’s influence, and the bolstering of community empowerment. Hickson (2013) argues that the ‘localist turn’ may be better identified as a ‘communitarian turn’, such is the continued importance placed on community by the coalition government. However Hickson (2013) realises that to assume the coalition government’s desire to devolve power and follow a strategy of localism is solely for the purpose of building community would be naive. As noted, the theory of social capital is as much a theory on empowering the individual as it is community. For Hickson (2013), this emphasis of the individual has permeated noticeably into the localism that has emerged in recent decades in the UK, particularly under the coalition government. Writing about the localist rhetoric of the coalition government, Lowndes and Pratchett (2012, p34) state that, ‘*social equality implicit in this language is diminished by the over-riding emphasis on individualism that is emerging in many policies’.* For Lowndes and Pratchett (2012), localism in the UK isn’t being used to bring people closer together and foster the development of communities. The persistent Conservative push to imbue the nation with a sense of aspiration and economic individualism is acting as a barrier to co-operation. There is a belief amongst some in the academic discourse, that although framed as a policy to embolden community in the UK, the real intention of the coalition government was to use localism to shape society for economic rather than social benefit. Bradley (2014, p644) follows this critical viewpoint, he writes;

*‘Under the coalition government ‘community localism’ appears as a scalar construction that addresses neighbourhood organisations as a model for behavioural change to accompany a societal reorientation towards the market as a model for society.’*

The dominant political and economic theory in the West for the last thirty years has been neoliberalism. One consequence is that the academic discourse have been framed within a neoliberal prism. Matters of governance, law and policy become categorized and characterised by the political zeitgeist in which they sit. A large proportion of literature on localism therefore is political commentary on how it can best facilitate a neoliberal society. Peck and Tickell (2002) write of the ‘neoliberalizing of space’. Although not direct, their framing of localism is that it occurs as a result of a neoliberal desire to shrink the state and centralised power. Davoudi and Madanipour (2013, p559) argue that the localism of the coalition government *‘can be conceptualised as the continuation and intensification of neo-liberalism’.*

Instead of direct financial and structural investment, which was far more a feature of New Labour’s regionalism, the removal of state support will promote a type of ‘social Darwinism’ (Davoudi & Madanipour, 2013) that will create, in theory, more robust and resourceful community groups. Central to neoliberal economic and social theory is the belief that wider society benefits when individual liberty is protected and empowered. Neoliberal theory works on the idea that a large and influential centralised government infringes on an individual’s liberty. A characteristic of a large central government from a neoliberal perspective is an increase in regulation, taxes and laws that interfere with society. This stifles efficiency, market forces and as a result economic growth (Holman & Rydin, 2013). This is why neoliberal advocates see devolution and localism as the best vessel for a strong society. Schreurs (2008, p353) asserts that there are many ‘*examples of local governments moving faster than and influencing central and national governmental decisions.’* Therefore a productive and dynamic society often occurs when the individual is closer to centres of power and better able to influence his or her surroundings.

There is a growing movement within localism, and broader environmental literature, that seeks to re-define localism outside of the existing neoliberal paradigm and pose potential alternative methods of governance and economic models (Curtis, 2003, Costanza et al, 2015, Hahnel, 2007, Gussen, 2012, Woodin & Lucas, 2004). Instead of placing improved economic efficiency as the central goal of localism, the emerging literature is making the environment and its continued sustainability the objective. Curtis (2003) is one of the leading proponents of the concept of ‘eco-localism’. Building from the concept of ‘ecological economics’ (Duchin & Marie-Lange, 1995, Costanza et al., 2015) Curtis (2003, p84) writes, ‘*eco-localism**analyzes many economic phenomena outside the conceptual boundaries of conventional theory.’* Eco-localism benefits therefore from being not as conceptually rigid as many other, specifically economic, schools of thought. It helps to bridge the ideological gap, or the *‘disconnect’* (Curtis, 2003, p84), that frequently occurs between economists and environmentalists who see the world via very different perspectives. One of the major differences in the literature between the neoliberal concept of localism and the emerging environmental or eco-localism is scope. The vast majority of neoliberal localism discourse focuses on governance. It looks at the role of central government and the level of influence it should have in an individual’s life. What Curtis (2003) is a proponent of with eco-localism is a far more holistic and comprehensive definition of localism addressing the environmental challenges of the 21st century requires more than just a devolution of governance (Curtis, 2003). It requires a total re-assessment of economic strategy. Indeed within literature, arguments are emerging that our entire legal basis requires reformulating (Ruhs & Jones, 2016).

There are those who wish to see the breakdown of international economic actors and a challenge to the acceptance of neoliberalism, and even capitalism, as the sole economic ideology. As Hahnel (2007, p66) notes;

*‘While today's capitalist economies can and must be reformed to make them more just, democratic, and less environmentally destructive, as long as our economies are dominated by giant corporations and driven by market forces, we will never achieve environmental sustainability, economic justice, or economic democracy.’*

Hahnel (2007, p67) argues further that there must be an alternative to the capitalism of today, asserting that a desirable economy must ‘*promote diversity rather than uniformity and initiative rather than passivity’.* The concept of an environmental strand of localism draws from Hildreth’s (2011) model of community localism and Hickson’s (2013) concept of communitarian localism. This communal governance structure appeals particularly to environmentalists and those concerned with curbing the growth of climate change. It is the belief of Johnston and Glasmeier (2007, p13) therefore that, *‘narrowly-local goals may very well impede the search for international solutions to global problems’.* Localism without structure and support from central government will falter and prove unable to co-ordinate an integrated response to large scale environmental challenges.

Many advocates of a more environmentally focused localism realise that in order to flourish as a concept, there needs to remain a level of central governmental influence and support (see for example, Williams et al., 2014). The fact remains that the modern world is globalised and a world increasingly of shared responsibility, when tackling threats to the sustainability of the environment and human life. Although localism seeks to challenge globalisation and the consumption driven nature of global society (Davoudi & Madanipour, 2015) detachment and creating an insular form of localism will not be conducive to enabling global action*.* For example, it prevents the possibility of ‘*developing a coherent biodiversity strategy across regions’,* as without adequate central governmental structure, platforms in which local communities and organisations can communicate and share practice are limited (Beech & Lee, 2011, p131).

The literature of localism, is diverse, complex and growing. Loosely it can be split into two groups. The first is the traditional form of localism theory, which works within the neoliberal paradigm and focuses on the actions of governance. The second is the emerging environmental localism that seeks to put forward a far more inclusive ideology. An ideology which challenges the existing beliefs regarding economics, and orientates society towards achieving collective progress on issues which are a threat to the continued sustainability of earth. What is clear is that localism is a term that inspires a huge divergence of opinion. Although there are clear pockets of unity and academic consensus, unlike other theories, localism does not have a clear conceptual structure. With this inherent fluidity and broad academic foundation, localism is a theory that can be placed to fit many contexts and narratives.

# 3. Localism and community energy

Community energy (CE) holds specific significance for this paper as it is an issue which possesses an environmental, social and political element within the framework of a localism policy. A lot of the literature and data regarding the last government continues to emerge, as the effects of 5 years of coalition rule are still being felt and put into context. Therefore, in this paper we focus on academic literature and official documents that are available on community energy.

The coalition government defined community energy (CE) as the following;

*‘Community energy covers aspects of collective action to reduce, purchase, manage and generate energy. Community energy projects have an emphasis on local engagement, local leadership and control and the local community benefiting collectively from the outcomes. Community-led action can often tackle challenging issues around energy, with community groups well placed to understand their local areas and to bring people together with common purpose.’* (DECC, 2013)

Published in 2014 by the DECC, the Community Energy Strategy is a detailed document establishing the government’s vision regarding community energy and its development through to 2020 and beyond. The strategy (DECC, 2014) highlights four individual strands which together form CE in the UK, these are;

* The Reduction of energy use
* Better management of energy
* Generating energy
* Purchasing energy.

CE is holistic and deliberately broad in scope and encompasses *‘a wide range of initiatives’* (Seyfang et al., 2014, p22)*.* These include large schemes such as the ownership, generation and creation of local renewable energy to smaller schemes of housing insulation and community building restorations and refurbishments (Seyfang et al., 2014). CE represents a key piece in a localist strategy for tackling environmental and energy challenges. The coalition government saw it as an important means of establishing local engagement on matters that have traditionally been the focus of central government (Walker et al., 2007, Bauwens et al., 2016). One of the main concepts behind CE is that a devolution of energy production and control can lead to a reduction in both energy consumption and harmful emissions (Koirala et al., 2016). It is a belief that ‘*local level decision-making can provide a vital and practicable means through which to deliver carbon reductions’* (Fudge et al., 2016, p1). As a piece of localist policy then, in definition, CE has the potential to provide an alternative means to tackling national emissions targets.

## 3.1 The emergence of UK Community Energy (CE)

The 1990s and early 2000s saw a rapid growth in wind energy. The first onshore wind farm in the UK was constructed in 1990 (Kern et al., 2014) and became popular with government with a so called ‘dash for wind’ (Walker et al., 2007) developed throughout the 1990s. However, the sudden emergence of imposing wind turbines on previously unspoilt landscapes was frequently met with hostility among those living within the locality of new wind farms (Walker et al., 2007). Although nationally renewable energy investment has been met with popular support for decades a lack of consultation and transparency led to increased NIMBYism (Walker et al., 2007, Valentine, 2014). Although later surveys proved a causal link to be inconclusive (Valentine, 2014), a lot of early opposition to wind farms was due to the perceived impact it would have on tourism. The feeling was that energy companies installing wind farms were making money at the expense of the community (Walker et al., 2007).

*‘Various societal factors influence the pace and efficiency’* (Ydersbond & Korsnes, 2015, p57)of all types of renewable energy and without robust support and a positive community relationship the sustainability of renewable projects are in jeopardy. Valentine (2014, p45) writes *‘the lesson is clear: arguing that wind farms are a necessary evil in light of climate change will simply not overcome the opposition to poorly planned wind farms.’* These early experiences of opposition to renewable energy within the UK helped to shape not only the emergence of CE, but also the popularity of localist thought within British politics. The coalition government’s belief with the passing of the Localism Act in 2011, was that democracy was undermined when people felt “*‘done to’ and imposed upon’”* (DCLG, 2011, p1). The establishment of CE provided community groups the opportunity to have a far greater sense of control on local energy matters. It helped also to improve communication between community groups, companies and local government. Most importantly however CE had the potential to lower barriers to progress and help to sustain the growth of renewable energies, something crucial to meeting national emissions targets.

The opposition to renewable energy prevalent during the 1990s highlighted the pressing need for a shift in societal attitudes. In short, a change in behaviour was needed to make individuals more tolerant and understanding of the reasons for renewable energy expansion. A growing strand of literature looks at ‘pro-environmental behaviour’ change (Hargreaves, 2011, Unsworth et al., 2013). Almost all of the existing theories on behaviour change are centred on the premise of changing an individual’s behaviour for a purely social benefit. Pro environmental behaviour change seeks to establish *‘behaviour that intentionally pursues reduction of the negative impact of people's actions on the natural world’* (Unsworth et al., 2013, p212). Behaviour change theory has gradually reached mainstream recognition and is now a concept actively pursued by the UK government. Revell (2013, p200) notes how under New Labour, and especially the coalition government, a ‘*focus on individuals and behaviour change has seeped into a number of areas of British policy’* being ‘*applied to a number of different policy challenges in the UK’.* CE is undoubtedly one such policy being heavily shaped by pro-environmental behaviour change theory.

Assessing the emergence of CE in the UK reveals an example of the coalition government employing a strategy of localism, making environmental progress in a creative and effective manner. By giving communities the chance to invest in renewable technology, the monopoly of renewable energy has begun to be broken down. The expansion of CE also helped to create a more favourable climate in which larger, commercial renewable companies can operate without threat of the community acting as a barrier (Bomber & McEwen, 2012).

The target set by the New Labour government was for 10% of energy production to be provided by renewable sources by 2010 (Walker et al., 2007). However by 2010, the figures released showed a stark failure to reach the 10% target, as only 3.3% of final energy consumption was of a renewable source (DECC, 2011b).

Since 2010 though there has been a substantial growth in renewable energy generation although it must be stressed that the vast majority will not, especially as it remains a new policy, have come from CE. Such a dramatic upsurge in renewable energy generation is partly a result of large scale constructions financed by major energy companies under the Renewables Obligation. The introduction of the Feed-in-Tariff in 2010 also played a significant part and saw a 3600% increase in solar installations over a two year timescale (Jones, 2015). Of course the introduction of the Feed-in-Tariff can be considered a neoliberal (individualistic) approach to localism as it was directed at individual households. However, there is little doubt that such large growth in such a short space of time would only be able to occur if the public were creating little to no opposition to development. The process of creating a social element to the energy sector, something that was traditionally purely utilitarian, can be seen as a vindication of localism and in design at least, an effective governmental policy.

A recent piece of research carried out by Community Energy England (CCE, 2015) highlights the significant and valuable impact the emergence of CE has had in England. What was startling from the research (CCE, 2015) was the ability of CE groups to turn relatively modest public funding into far larger sums of private investment. Collectively 38 of the 80 groups surveyed received 7.4 million pounds of revenue generated from feed in tariffs (FITs), they were able to turn this into 50 million pounds worth of private investments (CCE, 2015). These investments were in turn used to fund a multitude of local initiatives focused on enhancing social conditions for local residents and improving wildlife areas (CCE, 2015). In certain pockets across the country CE groups have proved that community led environmental schemes can not only lead to the creation of locally relevant initiatives, but also provide real value in their work. Part of the reason for this exceptional value is that individuals are far more inclined to work on a voluntary basis if it is for the good of their own community, leading to tangible results (CCE, 2015). In this regard CE provides something that a centrally administered energy policy simply could not (Rodgers et al., 2008). Although the research carried out by Community Energy England shows clear examples of CE being an effective policy it concedes that a localist environmental policy is being stifled by wider agendas and decisions from central government.

One of the most pressing challenges posed within the academic literature of CE, is how best to conceptualise and understand the social impact of a devolved, community based, energy sector. It is widely accepted, and promoted by governments, that allowing individuals greater access and control over their energy production is of high social and environmental value. However being able to broadly conceptualise a policy which is so inherently complex, diverse and grass-roots in structure, is difficult. It is notable that some of the research carried out observing CE groups struggles to coherently relate the highly localised findings to a broader, national context. Consequently there is an emerging narrative within the discourse that strives to address this issue of applying a workable framework to CE analysis (Seyfang et al., 2014, Hargreaves et al., 2013, Dóci et al., 2015, Nolden, 2013).

Both Seyfang et al. (2014) and Hargreaves et al. (2013) look at the role of intermediaries in the UK. Intermediaries within the context of CE are understood as groups that help to provide communities with knowledge, guidance and funding to carry out the installation of CE schemes. Hargreaves et al. (2013) identifies that these intermediaries in the UK are formed of governmental organisations such as the DECC, national NGOs such as the Energy Savings Trust and local government and NGOs, as well as having some business sector involvement. Hargreaves et al. (2013) stress that there is ‘*little evidence, to date, that community energy intermediaries have managed to build a coherent, robust and strategic community energy niche’.* Although CE is growing in popularity and interest, it is the opinion of both Hargreaves et al. (2013) and Seyfang et al. (2014) that intermediaries in the UK are poorly equipped with effectively facilitating the rising demand. There are many examples were intermediaries cannot *‘meet all the support needs of local groups’* (Seyfang et al., 2014). Seyfang et al. (2014, p42) carries on to state of CE;

*‘Despite the impressive growth of the sector in a context of inconsistent and constrained support, it is evident that the nascent niche we see is neither robust nor influential. Dedicated intermediary organisations struggle to keep up with changing policy priorities, and shifting policy contexts undermine local efforts to build projects.’*

Both Hargreaves et al. (2013) and Seyfang et al. (2014) highlight how the potential of CE to instigate wider, perhaps national, pro-environmental behaviour change is stunted by the inability of intermediaries to provide the relevant tools for growth. This essentially has the effect of locking in vital and innovative knowledge within a locality.

What this highlights is that CE, an environmental policy with large potential, was held back due to central government’s either unwillingness or inability to create enough, effective intermediaries. Hoffman et al. (2013) highlight how intermediaries, as well as poor planning, are unsurprisingly negatively impacted by the removal of central government investment.

*‘An equally problematic barrier to engaging the community in council policy centered on the recent shrinkage of financial resources available to local authorities in the UK, noticeably reducing the capacity of councils to drive forward their agendas for community engagement in the sustainable generation and management of energy’* (Hoffman et al., 2013, p1759)

Changes to national policy have undermined the more local aspects of renewable development. Often these changes were introduced due to apparent spiraling costs of various CE initiatives. For example, feed in tariffs (FITs) that supported CE projects were estimated to cost £8.6 billion between 2011 and 2030 (DECC, 2010). Throughout the 5 years of coalition government, FITs have been subject numerous reviews seeking to cut the level of financial support they provided (CEE, 2015, Muhammad-Sukki et al., 2013). In 2011 the coalition government launched two reviews of feed-in-tariffs after concern over their popularity, particularly with respect to small scale solar installations. The UK Treasury department (HM Treasury, 2010) proposed further cost reductions to a scheme that was already subject to a cap in cost of £400 million. These changes were subsequently challenged in court and were subject to extensive lobbying by campaign groups (Friends of the Earth, 2011). However, the changes to Feed-in-Tariff made in 2012 saw a dramatic fall in solar installations on individual households (Jones, 2015) and the exclusion of onshore wind from feed-in-tariffs from April 2016 is likely to have a significant impact on local wind projects.

To be effective in delivering CE localism must strike a balance of devolved responsibility and central oversight (Davoudi & Madanipour, 2015, Johnston & Glasmeier, 2007). Academics looking at localism as a strategy for pro environmental change realise that the presence of central planning, funding and governance is crucial to establishing effective localism. What is evident with CE in the UK, is that the coalition government distanced itself too far from the grass-roots, failing to provide not only adequate funding, but also structural bodies that can aid the longevity and growth of particularly, community led, renewable energy developments.

## 3.2 Conceptual flaws in Community Energy (CE)

Developing an understanding for what is meant by the ‘energy’ in the term community energy (CE) is rather straightforward. As expressed above, CE in action refers to the various initiatives that try to make energy production and use more sustainable. However, establishing an understanding of the ‘community’ in CE is far more difficult. The literature and academic discourse is rich with responses to the growing global phenomenon that is CE. Many (van de Schoor & Scholtens, 2015, Koirala et al., 2016, Bauwens et al., 2016, Seyfang et al., 2014,, Hargreaves et al., 2013, Saunders et al., 2012) make direct reference to CE and community initiatives. However in most of the academic research and literature little to no analysis is focused on establishing what is meant by ‘community’. The narrative surrounding CE consistently frames the community aspect as a positive, a social grouping where co-operation, interdependence and progress flourish. The discourse is often full of *‘benighted’* and *‘rose-coloured presumptions’* about the nature of communities and their relationships with renewable energy (Walker et al., 2010, p2658). In comprehensive research regarding the nature of CE in the UK, Seyfang et al. (2013) uncovered that 74% of CE groups surveyed had 10 or less members. The inclusiveness that is regularly portrayed as a facet of CE is perhaps overstated; as the vast majority of those living within the locality of CE initiatives are not directly involved in its development. Furthermore ‘*renewable energy projects can become more locally divisive and controversial if benefits are not generally shared among local people’* (Walker & Wright, 2008)*.* A survey of local residents living near 6 separate community renewable energy projects showed only 34% of people felt positive about the *‘degree to which local residents felt they had a sense of trust in those organising the relevant local project’* (Walker et al., 2010, p2658).

One of the goals of the coalition government Community Energy Strategy (DECC, 2014) was for CE to expand and help towards meeting national emissions targets. CE was seen as a means of making real progress in the renewable energy sector. However, engagement and support for certain CE initiatives is still lacking and in need of a boost (Walker et al., 2010). Some of the narrative in both the discourse and the governmental approach surrounding CE assumed that community is something that is often already in existence or can be quickly established. Community energy schemes often emerge from within pre-existing community and charity groups with an environmental focus (Seyfang et al., 2014). However, as Walker et al. (2010) highlight to the contrary, communities are far more fluid, unpredictable and transient than is frequently portrayed in both governmental and academic publications.

Wirth (2014, p236) argues that ‘community’ should be seen as a vital *‘analytical category’* which requires better governmental focus in order to deliver CE policy effectively. He echoes the opinion of Walker et al. (2010) regarding the complex nature of communities. Wirth (2014, p245) calls for governmental policy ‘*to be more tailored in order to tie in with existing institutional conditions (e.g. norms and established practices)’.* Policy delivered at even a local government level can overlook the nuanced dynamic and structure of many community groups. Poorly adapted community policy can sometimes have a detrimental impact, ‘w*hilst appearing inclusive community can also be deeply exclusionary, marginalising those who are seen as not fitting’* (Walker et al., 2010, p2658). Poorly planned community policy can lead to spiraling central costs which then necessitate changes that can undermine the objections of the policy itself (Jones, 2015). Additionally one of the criticisms of central government was that assumptions are made believing that CE schemes can be *‘replicated from place to place’* (Walker et al., 2010, p2662). Even with better, more comprehensive planning, Seyfang et al. (2013) argue that to set national policy expectations reliant on the activity of communities, will almost certainly lead to an unreliable model for change.

# 4. Summary of findings and discussion

This paper highlighted how a lot of the early ‘big society’ rhetoric of the coalition government, saw localism in a rather narrowly focused manner (Westwood, 2011, Bradley, 2014, Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012, Catney et al., 2014). Localism for the government was seen largely as the process of removing support and influence of central government. It was in essence the concept of addition via subtraction. In line with wider neoliberal principles, the government believed that with less reliance on the state, communities and individuals would have to find more ways to become self-reliant and resourceful, the process of which leads to greater levels of innovation and social problem solving. However this paper attempts to dispel this notion. Seyfang et al. (2013, p988) write;

*‘There is a limit to how much groups can achieve on their own. Instead, external sources of support are required to succeed and this indicates the strong need for consistent policy support, as well as intermediary networks, to ensure community energy projects have the resources they need to progress and achieve their objectives.’*

Those within the literature who challenge the neoliberal model of governance and economics (Curtis, 2003, Costanza et al, 2015, Hahnel, 2007, Gussen, 2012, Woodin & Lucas, 2004) realise that localism and successful devolution cannot occur without state government maintaining financial and structural support. What this paper has found however, is that the coalition government applied a style of localism that failed to allow many community schemes and initiatives to flourish. The coalition government followed a policy of localism to counter the centralised and technocratic governance style that emerged during New Labour’s governance (Clarke & Cochrane, 2013, Dorey & Garnett, 2010). The Conservative party creation of a community driven localism narrative may have been primarily a ploy to gain votes by tapping into a prevailing zeitgeist. This belief that the Conservative party’s localism strategy may be more style than substance has permeated into the general public. During their research, Walker et al., (2007, p76) observed that;

*‘A number of interviewees were critical of how the community concept had been appropriated and distorted from its “true meaning” by some of the government programs, with rhetoric and spin seen to dominate over substance’*

There is a growing perception that the rhetoric, laden with references to the strengthening of community and locality, is not matching the actions of the coalition government and also the current Conservative majority government. No clearer is this duality between rhetoric and action than with the removal of FITs. The research carried out by Community Energy England stresses how vital FITs have been in fuelling the growth of CE under the coalition government (CEE, 2015).The government approach to FITs echo's some of the key issues this paper raised. Localism that is both too locally focused and inadequately supported by central government struggles to effect meaningful change (Davoudi & Madanipour, 2015, Johnston & Glasmeier, 2007, Bradley, 2014, Catney et al., 2014). One of the most widely accepted positions within the literature is that neoliberal theories of governance and economics are ill suited to tackling environmental issues (Jackson, 2011, Woodin & Lucas, 2004). The shrinking of state influence and limited central spending will struggle to lead to effective environmental policies, which require long term investments and multi-level planning.

Many of the initiatives tried under CE policy represent new and innovative solutions to environmental concerns. It is crucial therefore that there is an element of central government funding to help stimulate the confidence of private investment into a relatively unpredictable sector.

What CE highlights, is in many ways, the coalition government established an effective model for creating pro-environmental change. FITs supported CE is an example of a localist governmental policy that prevents the renewable energy sector from being linear in scope and excluding the general public. It creates a social and participatory dimension to energy creation which educates, incites pro environmental behaviour and helps to spread the positive role renewable technology plays. Walker et al. (2007, p68) points out that prior to 2010 the UK had a *‘limited history of stakeholder involvement in energy planning and development’*. What the coalition government achieved in a short space of time, through a strategy of localism, has quite possibly, permanently altered the nature energy provision in the UK. However, this paper unequivocally highlights that many schemes and initiatives which possess clear potential to create significant change within the UK have been negatively impacted by the coalition (and now Conservative majority) government’s move to shrink the influence of central government, and particularly changes to the FIT regime.

# 5. Conclusions and recommendations

This paper sought to develop an understanding of the way in which the coalition government’s strategy of localism influenced environmental policy in the UK. Critiquing a term as broad as localism presents numerous challenges. Localism has no clear, agreed and unifying framework. It is in many ways a term of perspective that at times straddles the border of political and philosophical theory. This fluidity in definition and conceptual structure, combined with a lack of consensus within the broad literature of localism, allows for the appropriation of concepts to fit pre-existing motives. When the Localism Act was passed in 2011 the stated motives were to remove bureaucracy and the influence of central government. These were the issues portrayed to the public of the UK as the real barriers to developing innovation and thriving communities. In short, less central governmental involvement would be a positive development. What this paper finds however challenges this assertion. CE groups benefited significantly from governmental support in the form of FITs and also the work of intermediary organisations. When central funding and support is withdrawn from many grassroots schemes, rather than helping innovation, it effectively suppresses it. Successful localism policy is dependent on consistent and effective central funding and governance. This highlights not only a weakness in localism theory, that the term can be so easily shaped into fitting a conflicting point of view, but also shows that the coalition government used localism as part of a wider justification for cuts in spending. They did not approach a strategy of localism with the intention of maximising its potential.

For localism to become an effective means of governance and social structure within the UK, it is the recommendation of this paper that future governments look to the emerging environmental localism literature to influence decision making. While in the short-term some success can be created what this paper suggests is that neoliberal economic principles fundamentally clash with a concept of fully devolved localism and the model of wealth creation possible under CE policy. Advocates of environmental localism realise that greater challenges and alternatives to the dominance of neoliberal thought need to be established. The problems posed by climate change, habitat loss and resource scarcity require holistic and multifaceted solutions.

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**Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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