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National community support plan needed

Deeper Democracy Group

Community resilience is a vital component of social and economic recovery. Communities themselves have risen to the occasion magnificently. But to enable them to sustain this high level of involvement over the long term requires a new national approach to local factors which enable community activity.

This cannot be achieved by recycling 'big society'-type ideas, whose limited achievements have been accompanied by a steep decline in support for community activity.

During the past ten years there has been a devastating loss of amenities and support for communities. Despite some positive achievements by dedicated groups, local community and voluntary organisations are thinnest on the ground where they are most needed¹.

There is a manifest need for action to foster inclusive communities, building resilience based on social cohesion. The imposition of market criteria on community organisations has been corrosive.

Government has an essential role both in restoring conditions for communities to thrive and in opening up dialogue with the grass roots of civil society where there is already a ferment of ideas about how to build post-pandemic society on a better basis.

This situation demands a national plan for community support and dialogue. Key factors should include:

- A cross-party team dedicated to producing a national community support plan
- An agenda guided by an assembly of representatives of community groups from across the country
- A baseline including mapping the loss of community amenities and groups over the past ten years
- Setting a standard level of community amenities and support that should be available in each neighbourhood, especially the more disadvantaged, and a plan to put these in place
- Providing ringfenced resources to local authorities to revive and improve their community support functions in dialogue with local communities

¹ Dan Corry, *Where Are England's Charities?* New Philanthropy Capital, January 2020

- Encouraging and resourcing the growth of diverse and inclusive communities, to enable mutual aid and active citizenship to thrive, in genuine partnership with public services, universities, schools and other bodies
- Wider use of methods such as community development, community organising and citizens' assemblies²
- Ensuring that all community orientated policies and plans tackle racism in all its forms.
- Developing on from job protection and creation schemes into comprehensive long-term local plans with strong social and environmental objectives, accountable to the local communities they serve
- Reviewing the planning system to restore the power to councils to control development decisions, in dialogue with resident planning forums and neighbourhood plans, and to protect and increase local public spaces and facilities
- Making the links between community support and the environment, creating local green jobs to support communities to reduce their carbon emissions and protect biodiversity and resourcing communities to 'go green'
- Increasing and strengthening the Community Infrastructure Levy and ensuring that neighbourhood communities are able to influence its use
- Establishing a high government and media profile for the issue of community support, led by DHCLG with cross departmental support in particular from Treasury, Cabinet Office, No 10 Policy Unit and DH.

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² Described in our recent Compass pamphlet *Participation at 45°: Techniques for Citizen-led Change*, Compass, 2020)