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ENGAGING COMMUNITIES & STAKEHOLDERS

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REAL PLACEMAKING? YES, WE CAN

Will the new localism agenda deliver for communities? Yes, says **Julian Hart**, but it may take time to achieve the structural and cultural changes required for local communities to influence the destiny of, and take real pride in, the places they live

Ever since publication of Lord Roger's *Urban Task Force* report, now over a decade ago, there has been a great deal of rhetoric about placemaking. Significant elements of our planning policy were subsequently revised to promote better quality places. Yet to many, and particular those working at the implementation end of placemaking, this has proven to be simply more rhetoric. Real and good examples in the UK of both the creation of high quality, sustainable places and/or reinvigoration and transformation of existing urban settings into pleasant, attractive and sustainable places to live have remained the exception, not the rule.

The centralised system has failed spectacularly to deliver housing numbers. It has also failed to provide housing quality and real placemaking. Can or will the new agenda of localism deliver instead? It should: but there may well be highlights and pitfalls along the way.

Whilst there has been much public debate over whether the new localism will deliver on housing numbers, discussion on its relationship with placemaking has been more muted. In terms of delivering better placemaking, in theory localism and higher quality should be complementary. It is well understood that local control and accountability should naturally give rise to better informed policies, strategies and decisions, a longer term outlook, a more holistic approach and greater attention to detail. All of this should achieve higher quality buildings and

urban environments, designed to respond to local social, environmental and economic needs and aspirations, both now and into the future. It is certainly more likely to deliver on placemaking goals than a society whose culture is dominated by a top-down drive to hit numbers to meet year-end targets, with scant concern of the consequences for next year.

That's the theory. But what about the practice? As recently noted by Tim Williams, Navigant Consulting's Re-generation and Housing Advisory team, the single biggest barrier to achieving the aspirations of the new agenda is local control and accountability for finance. Localism will only work if the Treasury can be persuaded to loosen its grip on the national finances and allow local areas to invest in their destinies.

A quick comparison with our Scandinavian counterparts demonstrates the importance of financial localism. Over in Sweden a city authority receives all tax directly from its inhabitant population and then only passes on the higher tax-band increment to the national state. A person paying 40 per cent tax would see the 30 per cent increment (or 75 per cent of tax paid) going directly to the local government, with only the top 10 per cent increment (25 per cent of that paid) going to the central government. Anyone paying 30 per cent of less would see all their tax going locally. In this respect, the local government is in control of its destiny, and can afford to make serious decisions about its future. Any successful investment