

1. Thanks Camilla. It's wonderful to see so many of you here and I am very pleased that the collective "we" have been able to support many of you through our different programmes. Without all of you the Government's agenda for communities to 'do more' just wouldn't happen – so I'd like to take this opportunity to say a very big thank you for all the hours you put in, all the innovative ideas you come up with and the very real impact you have on (often very vulnerable) peoples' day to day lives. Thank you!
2. We know you can't do this without some access to finance. I'm delighted to be able to say that today's event is the start of our Access to Finance Week which will see brand new guidance on accessing finance on the MyCommunity website and a Twitter Q&A on everything you've ever wanted to know about community shares and crowd funding. This will happen next Tuesday.
3. At the end of today Rob Wilson, Minister for Civil Society, will be describing the different forms of support offered by central government to the voluntary and community sector, including funding through the Social Investment programme, and help with civil society skills and business links. And through the workshops and market place you'll be able to find out what else is available and how to improve your chances of accessing alternative forms of finance.
4. What I want to do now is briefly set out the Government's policy in the area of community empowerment (the Big Society as we used to call it) as this will give the context for why we in DCLG have provided support in the way we have, and why we are working with others including Power to Change to learn from this, to build on the success and to continue to provide this type of support to communities. It's good to get a chance to blow the Government's trumpet about the new ways of supporting communities we've collectively developed!

5. I guess you can say it started with the Localism Act 2011, which brought in the Community Rights: the Community Right to Bid, Community Right to Challenge, Neighbourhood Planning and a little later on the Community Right to Build. Collectively these are tools to enable communities to take greater control and exercise more influence over decisions affecting their local area.

6. All the evidence shows that local decision-making can transform local services and make services more flexible and responsive to local need. The Government wants more and more communities to step up to the mark.

7. Since the beginning of this Parliament several partners have run programmes on our behalf – providing expert advice, “critical friend” relationship manager support and small grants – all designed to bring community groups to a point where they can exercise their community rights – whether that’s taking responsibility for delivering a service; contributing to local economic growth; developing a Neighbourhood Plan; or acquiring an asset of community value like a pub, shop or village hall, and transforming the neighbourhood as a result.

8. In this financial year Government has invested £7m in this type of work. The programmes include Our Place, a neighbourhood level partnership-based approach to service transformation which brings together local partners such as public sector agencies, Councils and businesses with the wider community, to tackle issues identified by people in the area, set priorities, influence how local budgets are spent, and redesign, manage or deliver local services.

9. Working with Locality and others, we supported 118 areas in 2014-15 and are supporting a further 64 this financial year. The good news is assessment of cost benefit analyses produced by 14 exemplars show an impressive average financial return of 3.4 to 1. Martock, a large parish council in South Somerset is a great example, working in partnership with the local community to build the self reliance of residents, tackle social isolation and enhance employability.

10. Through First Steps, a “daughter programme” of Our Place, 115 areas are being helped by the Community Development Foundation to produce Community Action Plans setting out how they will take greater control of their area.

11. This scheme was developed in recognition that deprived communities may find it harder than others to access the community rights and associated support programmes. For instance the Surface Area Dance Theatre in Tyne and Wear, which works with the hearing impaired in areas of high deprivation and cultural isolation, has used the grant to consult the Scotswood deaf community on what its Community Action Plan should contain.

12. Essentially Our Place is designed for community groups who are ready to get involved in designing and possibly delivering public services, whereas First Steps is geared more at introducing groups to the Community Rights and getting them going on this journey. We’re providing £2.3m across both programmes this financial year.

13. A new venture for us this year has been Community Economic Development, to which we have allocated £1m. Working with Cooperatives UK, we have supported 49 deprived communities to develop bespoke economic plans, designed to improve their local area and tackle the issues that matter most to them. For instance, Bemerton Tenant Management Organisation is leading a project to regenerate a section of the Caledonian Road through creating a community market and providing independent business support.

14. Community Ownership and Management of Assets is the third main strand and is focused on asset transfer. We've provided £1.5m of support in 2015-16 through our partner Locality to 51 separate partnerships between local authorities and the voluntary and community sector. These are looking either to transfer multiple assets or single, complex ones and the programme provides support to help them develop joint strategies and action plans.

15. The programme has identified around 400 assets across the country that could be transferred into community hands, and covers projects in rural and urban areas. An interesting example is Elvaston Castle Development Board's project to work with the National Trust and Derbyshire County Council to develop plans for the future of Elvaston Castle, a Grade II listed Manor House with 200+ acres of woodlands, parkland and formal gardens.

16. Alternative finance models such as community shares and crowd funding are increasingly being used to attract community investment in local ventures. This year we and the Department for Energy and Climate Change have provided £320,000 to support the Community Shares Unit, with the aim of growing a sustainable and self-regulated community shares market to secure the long term success of the community shares model.

17. The Unit provides support, information and resources to community groups and enterprises looking to develop share offers and to investors seeking to understand more about the community shares market. Since 2012 communities have invested over £57m in local enterprises from over 50,000 new community shares investors; a fantastic return on a Government investment of £650,000 ! In particular 2012-15 has seen the use of shares for community-led renewable energy schemes, pub and shop buy-outs, and emerging activities in the food, farming and regeneration sectors.

18. The other programme we are running is Delivering Differently in Neighbourhoods, where we are providing a total of £2m across 2014-15 and 2015-16. Through this we are supporting 24 local authorities to redesign services at a neighbourhood level, working in partnership with local people and organisations. The services local authorities are looking at fall into five thematic groups, focusing on specific service areas: adult social care, health and well-being; early intervention with children and families; community safety; devolution to town and parish councils; and community spaces.

19. Finally, the team and partners have developed the My Community Advice Service and Network which provides phone and email guidance from experts, enables support from peers and provides face to face networking opportunities. These services are available to everyone and I hope you are all making good use of them: details are on the website at www.mycommunity.org.uk.

20. The online networking aspect of this, along with access to other resources, is located on the JustAct website, where you can share practical experience and discuss challenges and achievements with your peers. Again this is available to everyone and I would encourage you to make full use of it.

21. We wouldn't have been able to deliver any of these successful programmes without the support of our partner organisations, most of whom are here today. We are looking forward to continuing to working with all these partners, and with Power to Change and other friends in the social finance field, to provide a cohesive support offer for communities in the years ahead.

22. I'd also like to take the opportunity to say a huge thank you to RBS for hosting and sponsoring this event – quite literally we couldn't have done it without you.

23. Before I finish I'd just like to flag up the latest policy in town: Devolution.

24. The previous Coalition government made steps towards breaking open the highly centralised power structures that had been built over several decades. The Localism Act, City Deals and reform of Business Rates all played a part in starting to shift power from Whitehall to local government and communities.

25. The Devolution Deals that we are currently agreeing take this a step further. We have announced deals in seven areas so far and we are busy negotiating many more. These deals are giving Local Government more control of investment in economic growth, transport and strategic planning as well as wider public services. Our push towards decentralisation is also enabling local councils to retain and control the business rates they collect and to have greater control over the setting of these rates.

26. But we also want devolution to be a feature of how the public sector as a whole works. So we expect local government to be imaginative and active in devolving decision-making powers and service delivery responsibilities to town and parish councils and to VCS groups, wherever this is feasible and desirable.

27. Devolving service design and delivery to community level delivers improved outcomes through better sequencing and coordination of activity and better tailoring of services to suit local needs; reduces demand on services by allowing problems to be tackled early; and builds the resilience of communities.

28. So here's my plea. If any of you has a good story to tell about delivering a local service in a way that is more effective, cheaper and more appropriate than the alternatives on offer we would love it if you could make your case for inclusion in the Devolution Deal implementation negotiations in your area.

29. To do this you could approach your local Devolution Deal partnership contact to check that they know about your organisation's achievements and offer to help with designing and delivering their proposals. The principal local authority in your area will know who they are and have their contact details.

30. And you can make links with other VCS organisations, parish and town councils, residents' associations, faith groups etc. in your county or region, to present a joined-up approach – pulling together good examples of where the involvement of neighbourhoods and community groups in decision making and / or service delivery has worked well, and backing these up with facts and figures.

31. But in order to play their part in devolution, voluntary and community organisations need to be financially self-sustaining and that leads me neatly to introduce Cliff Prior, Chief Executive of UnLtd, who will be able to tell us what a funding organisation looks for when deciding whether to support a voluntary and community sector project. I'm really looking forward to hearing from him, and from Ian Scholes, whose organisation Spacious Place has already pulled this off.

32. I wish you all an interesting and informative event – please go ahead and grab one of the funders who are here and get as much info as possible from them – and as Camilla mentioned you all have expertise too so please make the most of the networking opportunities and see what you can learn from each other.

33. Good luck!