



CONFERENCE BRIEFING

A SPECIAL REPORT FROM LONDON COMMUNICATIONS AGENCY

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- **Cameron sticks to his economic path**
- **Concerns over planning framework changes**
- **High Speed 2 remains a top priority**
- **Boris calls for a village culture**

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As 'mid-term' conferences go, overall the Conservative's week in Manchester was a relatively upbeat affair, albeit set against a backdrop of continuing grim economic news from Europe and very little signs of domestic growth. With the exception of 'Catgate' – the ongoing feud between Ken Clarke and Theresa May over an immigration case – the party worked hard to project a unified front and, as both Cameron and Osborne highlighted in their speeches, focussed on dealing with the deficit, reviving the economy and reforming key services.

The planning system featured heavily with worries surfacing from MPs, councillors, housebuilders and environmentalists over what the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) will mean for future development in the UK and its relationship with the localism agenda. However there was some good news for the development industry with the announcement of the revival of the Right to Buy scheme and the planned sell off of government owned land which the Coalition believes will dramatically help the building and supply of new affordable homes.

Investment in transport infrastructure was also a much discussed issue with a much more favourable reception to the High Speed 2 (HS2) project compared with last year, as well as recognition of the importance of both Crossrail and the improved Thameslink lines to London's economy. However aviation remained well off the party's agenda causing concern for airport representatives and airline operators.

Meanwhile in health, Secretary of State Andrew Lansley faced continued hostility to the Health and Social Care Bill, albeit most of this was outside the conference, and concerns over whether he can see the proposals through against resurfacing opposition from various parts of the healthcare spectrum.

On the Olympics there was a sense that politicians and decision makers' thoughts are starting to turn to the Games legacy with the construction phase just about complete. Jeremy Hunt announced plans for an Olympics school sports competition and highlighted the tourism opportunity for London and the rest of the UK next summer. However there was little detail on the economic and social legacy for East London.

And finally the party faithful's star of the conference, as always, was Boris Johnson, albeit with a slightly more serious speech and a stronger focus on crime compared with previous years. The Mayor spoke of 'putting the village back into London' and people pulling together to make the city a better place, arguably mirroring the Big Society message. Meanwhile away from the stage Boris was steadfast in dismissing claims that he may return to parliament and is clearly so confident of retaining the Mayoralty in 2012 he didn't make one reference to Labour challenger Ken Livingstone in his speech.

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Section One: David Cameron's speech

Whilst the leader's speech remains the main act at a party conference, any high expectations are now usually dampened in advance with newspapers and broadcasters given key excerpts in advance and scrutinising and analysing these before the leader has even opened his or her mouth. For Cameron this was doubly difficult as one of his key sections on paying back debt was embarrassingly removed from his delivery after it had already been profiled in the media.

The speech was also heavily previewed as a 'no win, no lose' event given the Coalition still has up to three and a half years to run. It was therefore free of any new policies or direction for the Conservatives but centred on the country holding its nerve on austerity measures, in line with his Chancellor's very sober yet consistent message two days before, and being optimistic about the future. The words 'people' and 'leadership' featured strongly throughout and whilst 'Big Society' was only mentioned twice, the narrative of the Cameron era remains and the message that we are (still) all in this together.

“ *This is a localist plan from a localist party.*”
David Cameron

Cameron was though at pains to talk about the measures that government was taking to stimulate the economy including help for businesses cutting through regulation and creating 250,000 apprenticeships to help the manufacturing and engineering sectors. He also referred to planning reform proposals saying these would incentivise local people to back development by allowing their council to retain the business rate and the council tax.

London had only a few specific mentions but Boris was highlighted early on with a reference to keeping London Conservative in 2012. Also name checked was the Tech City in East London, a favourite of Cameron in recent speeches, with nods to Facebook, Intel, Google, Cisco – even Silicon Valley Bank – investing in the sub-region. However the Olympics was interestingly only given fleeting mentions at the beginning and in combination with the Diamond Jubilee, and the Paralympics not at all.

Section Two: Housing and Planning

The Coalition Government's changes to the planning system and the localism agenda featured heavily in the conference fringe. Bob Neill, the Minister responsible for planning and local government at the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG), had been tasked with covering this and spoke at over 12 events covering these issues in the first two days alone, the majority of which asked the familiar question of how growth can be delivered under the new proposals. Neill had a tough task with worried rural councillors and MPs seeking clarification over plans for the countryside whilst the housing and development industry expressed concerns over the supposed incentives for local councils and people to approve development rather than just object. One planning lawyer at a fringe event even referred to a resident group in North London that had sent round flyers to its members on the Localism Bill earlier this year saying this was an opportunity to prevent development.



Nobody expects the town hall binquisition."

Eric Pickles, CLG Secretary of State on proposals to allow councils to reinstate weekly rubbish collections

Neill handled these concerns relatively well and used the ongoing consultation on the National Planning Policy Framework to reassure delegates saying that the government was 'prepared to listen'. He also wouldn't say whether councils will be given more time to get their local plans in place something that Trudi Elliott, chief executive of the RPTI and many others said was crucial if the new system was to work. If these are not in place then the default response will be 'yes', something which concerned many councillors present.

However Gary Porter, Conservative Group leader of the Local Government Association was adamant that the new system would work and would avoid having 'rogue planning inspectors' overturn local decisions. Hammersmith and Fulham (H&F) leader Stephen Greenhalgh also welcomed the change, particularly the business rate localisation, referring to Westfield's shopping centre/residential development in White City where the borough had not received the economic kick-back it deserved with all the money going instead to central government. Greenhalgh also made a number of mentions of Old Oak Common, noting that it was on a par with White City and Earls Court in terms of economic opportunity. Greenhalgh is keen to get a HS2 rail station there and sees it as vital to the H&F economy in the long-term.



I fear for my life at planning committee meetings."

Hammersmith & Fulham leader Stephen Greenhalgh

There was also unsurprisingly much debate over the definition of 'sustainable development', a central plank of the NPPF and on which ministers have been hard pushed to explain. If there was a consensus it was that this includes social, economic and environmental factors but will undoubtedly mean different things to different people.

In terms of actual policies, the Conservatives announced plans just before the conference to bring forward publicly owned land for development as a way of helping growth. Launched by Cameron and referenced by both Communities and Local Government (CLG) Secretary of State Eric Pickles and Housing Minister Grants Shapps, the plan hopes to deliver 100,000 new homes by 2015. The proposals received a positive reception from the development industry although those who have experienced the rigmarole of acquiring and developing public land have already asked that the process be made as simple and time/cost effective as possible.



Ken Livingstone was a one man planning authority who was prepared to sit down and talk to developers, this was one thing he got right."

Bob Neill, CLG Minister

Alongside this, there was much discussion over the Government's decision to bring back the 'Right to Buy' scheme and using the receipt from each council home sale to fund one more new affordable home. It is though very unclear how this will work in practice for councils and those in the housing sector. The Coalition's new housing strategy due out in November will therefore be key.

Section Three: Transport

The start of the party conference was framed by the proposal from the Conservatives to review the 70mph speed limit and possibly increase it to 80mph. Whilst welcomed by many within the party, the plan has been criticised by road safety campaigners and green groups, and looks like a risky proposition electorally.

The same can still be said for High Speed 2 (HS2) which dominated much of the transport fringe at conference. There was though a much more visible presence from the 'Yes' campaigners compared with last year and ministers were more prepared to back the project. This included Labour leader of Manchester City Council Sir Richard Leese, who said he felt like an "alien" at the conference but highlighted the huge benefits that the project will bring to the north west of England.

Secretary of State for Transport Philip Hammond urged Conservatives to get behind HS2 and also announced that the Government would shortly be publishing "a comprehensive blueprint for reforming our railways, asking the hard questions about taxpayer subsidy and considering the options for greater local commissioning of services". As with all rail reform this was welcomed with some scepticism although there is recognition that the current system, and particularly rising rail fares needs looking at.

“*The job of Government is to act in the interest of the nation as a whole, taking the tough decisions for the long-term.*”

Philip Hammond, DfT Secretary of State on HS2

Despite this focus on rail and HS2, the Conservative hierarchy seemed wary of saying outright that this would act as a complete alternative to airport expansion. Transport Minister Theresa Villiers noted that high speed rail would "free up space for long-haul flights" but failed to say what this would mean for airports, particularly in the south east where an argument remains that London needs a new major hub airport or a dramatically bigger Heathrow. She then defended an accusation from Airports Operators Association chief executive Darren Caplan over the government not having an aviation policy by saying that the government had already legislated and taken decisions on airport security, aviation regulation and operational freedoms at Heathrow and had 'looked at the air passenger industry' although she reaffirmed the government's opposition to a possible 3rd runway at Heathrow. Interestingly, since the conference, Coalition proposals have emerged for 'Heathwick' a new mainly underground high speed rail service between Heathrow and Gatwick.

The Mayor was also completely aviation-free not mentioning airports once in his speech (see section four) even though he said that London "could drive the economy" so long as investment in transport continues. However a number of London figures including Kulveer Ranger, the Mayor's environmental and digital and adviser (and former Transport lead) and Steve Norris, a board member at TfL and former Mayoral candidate, highlighted Boris's key role in securing the funds needed to continue delivering Crossrail and the new improved Thameslink line, schemes that both featured in Boris's speech.

Section Four: The Mayor's Speech

Boris Johnson's speech has become one of the biggest draws at the Conservative Party Conference, producing comfortably the biggest crowd bar the leader's speech. However despite the usual witty remarks and puns, this year's speech was a little predictable and in parts re-hashed – he again used his references to UK towns and cities that manufacture items for London transport or Olympic venues.

The central phrase in this year's address was 'putting the village back into London' – and how by capturing and using the romantic view of village life and understanding the values of something, then together Londoners could make improvements to the capital. This dovetailed nicely with Cameroon's speech and the Big Society agenda.

This was though a little strange given he is a politician seeking re-election in just seven months time. There was no call to (campaigning) arms and not one reference to his predecessor Ken Livingstone who had referred to Boris 24 times during his own conference speech. This was arguably a clever tactic, removing even the slightest possibility of Livingstone back in City Hall and instead concentrating on a job well done over the past three and a half years but not yet complete. This was supported by Johnson's rather surreal interview by Newnight's Jeremy Paxman where he said he wanted to get on with being Major and denied that he would stand for Parliament again. He even said this could be his last big job in politics.



From the Crusher with Love."

Boris, referring to the zero tolerance road tax policy that operates in New York

As with previous Johnson speeches, the content was weighted heavily on crime and transport. Boris opened with the former referencing the riots but highlighting the positive reaction from communities across London who stood up to the rioters or cleaned up the mess. Boris also name checked the new Met commissioner Bernard Hogan-Howes's belief in the 'Capone principle' of cracking down on the small stuff which will lead to the big stuff taking care of itself. He noted that if people swore at the police they would get arrested before reading through a list of decreasing crime stats including youth murder and tube offences.

On transport the Mayor referenced how he had made costs savings at TfL to ensure that money could go directly towards the tube investment, highlighting that the Victoria line was going 3mph faster, although this was due in part to the new trains. He did however completely avoid aviation and any references to a possible Thames Estuary Airport, indicating at a fringe event later in the week that this has been kicked well into the long grass and that it won't be a central part of his transport manifesto.

On housing, Boris used his village theme to briefly highlight that he was 'on course' to deliver 50,000 affordable homes by May 2012 as well as noting his commitment to providing family sized dwellings rather than 'hobbit homes.' He then moved swiftly onto his commitment to planting more trees, steering away from giving any view on the proposed changes to the planning system, the social housing agenda and localism.

Section Five: London 2012

With the Games just nine months away, discussions over London 2012 are now just beginning to focus on the legacy and benefits for sport and business. Secretary of State at the Department for Culture, Media, Sport, Jeremy Hunt used his own speech to highlight an 'Olympic-style school sports competition' as well as National Lottery financial backing for grassroots sport that will mean that those sports will receive a rise in funding over the next four years. Hunt put this in the context of almost all other budgets being cut over this time period. Meanwhile for business, Hunt specifically referenced how 97% of the £6bn Olympic contracts were allocated to firms in the UK and, mirroring Boris's conference speech, he detailed where in the UK certain construction elements of the Olympic Park were produced before highlighting an opportunity to produce a lasting legacy for tourism with the number of extra visitors expected to be in the capital and the rest of the country during the summer of 2012.

Transport Minister and MP for Chipping Barnet Theresa Villiers – speaking during the week on transport in relation to the hosting of the Games – said that London 2012 would provide a real opportunity to realise the importance of low carbon transport. She detailed how London would 'grind to a halt' if it was not for low carbon transit before describing how there would be a modern transport system in the capital post Olympics which would provide Londoners with a transport legacy.

Meanwhile Richard Ottaway, MP for Croydon South and chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for the Olympics, noted at the London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (LOCOG) fringe event how the willingness of all parties to make the Games a success meant that the 2010 General Election did not provide the 'potential hiccup' some thought could happen. The Conservative Croydon South MP felt that there would be a tangible legacy for the entire country in light of hosting the Olympics.

Chief executive of LOCOG Paul Deighton prioritised communications and operations as the two areas they need to perform well in now the construction phase is almost complete and under budget – although he was quick to reassure delegates that the final few months of preparation could be expensive. In the question and answer session, many councillors from outside of London bemoaned the lack of a legacy outside of the capital – a point denied by Ottaway. Councillor Stephen Castle of the Local Government Association indicated that local authorities across the country should use the Olympics to improve their sports provision.

Section Six: Health

The proposals for changes to the National Health Service (NHS) – and particularly Secretary of State Andrew Lansley's Health and Social Care Bill – formed much of the debate both inside and outside of the conference.

Following an open letter signed by 400 doctors to the House of Lords urging them to reject the new health proposals, Lansley was forced to address the media with details on how the Coalition is united over the plans. It was the same day that the Secretary of State addressed delegates at Conference in a speech that hotly defended the Health and Social Care Bill proposals. He maintained that no promises made pre General Election 2010 had been broken and reiterated his desire that the NHS remains the Government's 'top priority'.

The Health and Social Care Bill is designed to continue the values of the NHS – 'a comprehensive, high-quality service for all, free at the point of use and based on need, not ability to pay' – Lansley told conference. He spent much of the speech moving to reassure delegates that the Bill would improve health outcomes and not seek to privatise elements of the NHS as has been reported.

Lansley mentioned the NHS staff survey that found over 50% of respondents would not be happy for their own family to use the healthcare service they provide. He went on to detail how local authorities were due to play a bigger part in healthcare by establishing Health and Wellbeing Boards. Lansley heaped praise on his Liberal Democrat colleague, Paul Burstow – MP for Sutton and Cheam – and the rest of his Department of Health team with the specific reference to Burstow to emphasise how well the Coalition has been working together.

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