

LYONS INQUIRY

into Local Government

REPORT ON COUNCILLOR ENGAGEMENT EVENTS - 2006

Preface from Sir Michael Lyons

I held a series of councillor-focused events over the summer to seek the views of, and engage directly with, a range of councillors from across England. This important group of stakeholders are one of the key public faces of local government as well as the indispensable building blocks of local democracy, therefore their input is essential to my Inquiry.



I was encouraged by the good attendance at these events and drew from them some very clear messages. Amongst a very rich set of reflections, it was clear to me, listening and talking to councillors at these events, that there is a strong appetite among them for greater local responsibility. There was regret and frustration that local priorities were often crowded out by national targets. Some councillors also expressed the view that years of a tendency towards centralisation by government had led to councillors often feeling disempowered. Councillors felt especially strongly about planning decisions, which they felt were often closest to the hearts of their constituents but where, too frequently, their councils were overruled by central government.

I was pleased to hear how keen councillors were to improve their communication with residents. They felt that a more transparent and devolved system would assist this and I agree. They saw communication as part of the process of public engagement. I support this as well, but it was clear to me from what they said that councils vary in the extent to which they see proactive citizen engagement as part of their core business.

Councillors made some interesting suggestions. In particular, those who were keen, as am I, to see a more specific role description for councillors with a clearer indication of the time commitment required, commended the model used by the NHS for its non-executive directors. There was also real enthusiasm for widening the pool of people coming forward to be councillors, through training and recruitment, going beyond political parties. I was also interested to hear how keen councillors are at all tiers to have responsibility for individual ward budgets.

I was interested to hear councillors reflecting on the vital role of political parties in improving the calibre of councillors. There were also some interesting ideas on how to improve the way political groups operate. At the same time, councillors expressed an appreciation that in many areas, voters no longer feel exclusive party allegiances to the extent that they once did.

A report of the events follows, set out by theme. Whilst I do not share all the views and opinions quoted, I value the diversity and richness of the many perspectives I gleaned and I am very grateful for all the councillors who gave up their time to attend these events and to the many more who have given me their views through other routes.

Michael Lyons

Introduction

As part of my Inquiry, I held three engagement events for Councillors during July 2006. They were held in venues in London (with support from the ALG), Warwickshire (with help from Warwickshire County Council) and Liverpool (supported by Liverpool City Council).

I led the events with support from three serving councillors: Councillor Sir Simon Milton (Leader of Westminster City Council) in London, Councillor Bryony Rudkin (Suffolk County Council) in Warwickshire and Councillor Richard Kemp (Liverpool City Council) in Liverpool. I am grateful to all three for their help.

The events were deliberately small and focused, allowing detailed discussion and complementing the wider consultation and other events through which I have heard so many councillor views. The events were designed to build on the work in my Interim Report "National prosperity, local choice and civic engagement", recognising the vital role of councillors, particularly in their 'front line' role as local representative. The discussion focused on the following issues:

- How can local government's accountability be improved?
- How can the role of local councillor be made more attractive and rewarding?
- How can the convening role of local councils be enhanced?
- How should local government be funded in the future?

Attendees

Applicants were sought via publicity in Local Government First and the Municipal Journal, kindly facilitated by the LGA, and through the Inquiry's website. Seventy five councillors attended across the three events, with a good balance between different tiers of local government, geographical areas, urban and rural, executive and non-executive roles. The political spread was approximately two fifths each Labour and Conservative, with the remainder Liberal Democrat plus 9 independent/other parties. The age profile was slightly younger than the national age profile, with a significantly younger group in London. Just over a quarter of those attending were female, with better female representation at the London event. Black minority ethnic councillors were present at the London event only. This was reasonably reflective of the councillor population, if not the wider population.

At the Warwickshire event, most of those attending were from two-tier authorities and many were on more than one council, including parish and town councils.

The following notes summarise the views expressed across the three events.

Session 1 – Improving local government’s accountability

1.1 How can we improve levels of public trust and confidence in local government?

This was recognised as an important issue, but many considered that a lack of trust was endemic in society more widely, so that the challenge in improving trust in councils specifically was considerable. There was a consensus that central government needed to lead the way in demonstrating its trust in local government, since its lack of trust had undermined public confidence. Within this context, the key issues were identified as:

Clarity and transparency

- A need for greater transparency – clarity about who does what, clarity in the funding system, abolition of council tax capping.

National burdens

- Councillors felt constrained from focusing on the local by nationally imposed burdens (unduly extensive performance management in particular). If there was more flexibility, councillors could and would focus more on the local.
- Some regulatory regimes (planning, licensing) are so heavily circumscribed for councils that they felt decisions cannot sufficiently reflect local considerations and concerns, leading to public disillusionment with local government. Local people want and seek to get involved in, for example, adopting an approach to licensing which helps tackle street drinking – but the detailed national framework means there is little scope for local tailoring, making engagement seem frustrating and sometimes pointless. Comparisons were made with Sweden and the US where it is easier for councils to take a stance on such issues which reflects the distinctive needs and aspirations of their community.

Communication

- There was general agreement that councils need to be better at communicating with local people; working with local media, so that local government issues are covered in a more ‘grown up’ way; building public understanding of what local government can and cannot do; using local radio and TV; making better use of councillor websites.

Councillor attitudes and behaviour

- At council and at ward level, councillors needed to be making promises to the electorate – and keeping them.
- Councillors should be showing an interest in the whole of the locality, not just the council services, getting involved in issues such as retention of local shops.
- Some saw the public as put off local government by ‘political bickering’ and the way the local party whip could override the role of representing local views.

Public attitudes

- While there was no problem in getting the public/residents interested in controversial issues, there were challenges in making this a positive

and productive process, for example getting the timing right so that there was space for a meaningful debate before the decision was taken.

1.2 What are the factors that would help to increase voter turn-out at local elections?

Structures

- There was some support for voting change: suggestions included weekend voting over more than one day, compulsory voting, council tax discounts for voters, PR so that every vote counts. There was strong support for four year fixed term elections.
- Very large councils were seen as discouraging turnout – due to the perception of the voter that their representative would be one amongst too many.

Communication

- There was acknowledgement of the need to engage young people as future voters.
- Issues of transparency and understanding of local government were highlighted, in particular that voters frequently did not understand what councils did and were responsible for, it was argued that changing this view would make a difference to turnout.

Voter attitudes.

- There was concern that voters saw councils as simply doing the will of central government *“Unless the public see local councillors as having real power to make a difference, then they feel ‘what is the point?’”*
- Councillors mentioned an increased propensity among the electorate to vote for a mix of candidates rather than a simple endorsement for one party or another, reflecting a complexity of message that the citizen is conveying through her/his vote.

1.3 What are the main things councils can do to encourage positive involvement of local people in local issues outside election times? Is there anything central government can do to help?

Some councillors considered that they were constantly engaged with the public by the very nature of the issues they were dealing with and they did not perceive that there was any deficit to be rectified *“We have enough debates without encouraging them”*. Having meetings in public that the public could address, with issues ‘properly publicised’ seemed enough for many.

The key suggestions regarding what central government should do differently are covered in the points already made above, in particular about councils being given more autonomy and flexibility: *“Stop interfering!”*, *“Central government should show local government respect and listen to local government”*. Those that felt there needed to be greater public involvement identified the following issues:

- Parish and town council representatives saw them as key tiers of governance.
- Some considered that scrutiny could be used to generate interest in the community.
- There was strong support from all tiers for ward level budgets for local area bodies and also for individual councillors to hold budgets to enable them to tackle small but specific issues in their wards, and to be seen by local people to do so.
- There was concern that, while grant funding to tackle specific local issues was welcomed initially, it could raise expectations, but being time limited, it was followed by disappointment and disillusionment when funding ceased.
- Some argued that if more funding was raised locally and spending was more devolved, then the relationship between the public as taxpayers and the council would feel much closer and it would be much easier to generate public interest and involvement in local government decision making.
- Neighbourhood forums and other local structures were seen to help but some councillors suggested the need to avoid very rigid structures, since communities changed and patterns of involvement shifted to reflect different constituencies' degree of interest in certain issues. It was noted that some groups in the community needed to be specifically targeted as part of any engagement strategy.

Session 2 – the role of councillors

2.1 What are the main things councils can do to make the role of councillor more attractive, rewarding and easier to fulfil?

The main issues raised were increasing public awareness of the role and its profile, a lack of practical support for councillors, the attitudes of officers, wider concerns about the experience of being a councillor and councillors' terms and conditions.

Public awareness

- Suggestions were made about giving more publicity to councillors' work and achievements to improve the perceived status of the role
- There should be generalised advertising to recruit councillors, with sessions for people to find out more about the role, independent of political parties.

Practical support

- Councillors wanted more administrative support, systems for tracking case work, better information on their ward and what was going on there.
- Those on parish councils argued that the issues around lack of support were even more marked for them and they considered it would be wrong to give parish councils more powers/duties without increasing support proportionately.

Attitudes of officers

- A number of councillors were concerned that their councils were designed for the convenience of officers (for example meeting times) and felt alienated by officers whom they saw as having a 'can't do' attitude. Some felt that officers hid behind national targets and diktats.

The experience of being a councillor

- There was concern about how to make sure there was a policy development role for non-executive councillors since it was only through the proactive use of their local knowledge and ability to gain democratic legitimacy that policy making would be truly effective. It was also identified that feeling excluded from policy making can make the role of backbench councillor very unattractive
- Some suggested that councils can use Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP's) and any local area bodies which are part of the LSP structure as a way to involve all members in engaging with the community and thus to make their job more rewarding
- It was suggested that if councillors could better identify in council plans and processes exactly what is going to happen on 'their patch', they would feel far more empowered and be more effective
- Councillors identified they needed to value their distinctive role more and stop *"trying to be officers"*.

Terms and conditions

- A number of councillors were very concerned that the current system of allowances made it difficult for councils to pay the rate that the job warranted and that local decisions to increase allowances to realistic levels were virtually impossible. They called for a national system of allowances.
- Several women councillors considered that daytime meetings and reluctance to pay childcare deterred women and working age councillors (this was from a range of councils). Many councillors mentioned the need to move to evening meetings.
- Some suggested that private sector employers should be required to give time off for council duties.
- There was enthusiasm for the clarity offered by the guidelines for NHS non-executive directors, with its definitions of the role, the functions and what time should be spent.

2.2 Is there anything central government should do (or not do) to make the role of councillor more attractive, rewarding and easier to fulfil?

Councillors believed that central government did have a part to play in making the role of councillor more attractive and fulfilling. They argued that central government should:

- Trust local government and give the flexibility to allow local spending decisions reflecting local need.
- Introduce individual councillor budgets *"Give local councillors actual powers/funding so people can see local councillors can make a*

difference, not just 'the council did this or that' but promote local councillors individually".

- Change the ethical standards requirements which often prevent councillors making decisions or even speaking on issues in their areas on planning, licensing etc. Generally, there was dissatisfaction with the current standards framework.
- Reduce the government's and other authorities' scope for overruling councils, especially on planning, since councillors' ability to respond to the issues which local people really care about is currently too limited and their overall credibility therefore suffers.
- Change tax rules so that councillors' allowances are not taxed.
- Promote voluntary groups and other forms of community engagement *"as well as rather than instead of"* elected local government.

2.3 What are the main things political parties should do (or not do) to make the role of councillor more attractive, rewarding and easier to fulfil?

Discussion of the role of political parties focused on selection and training of council candidates, group organisation and the approach of parties more widely. It was suggested that parties should:

Selection and training

- Attract a larger pool of potential candidates from which to select and then continuously train in advance of elections – in some councils, one or more parties had trained candidates in advance and given mentoring.
- Organise training at political group level, rather than relying exclusively on training organised by council officers or the leadership of the council.
- Give more serious consideration to how to attract quality candidates. *"All political parties should have a much more rigorous system in their sorting of candidate panels to promote quality of candidates".*
- Consider welcoming into the fold people who do not necessarily wish to sign up to an entire political programme: *"Political parties should not be so unwelcoming to apolitical individuals. Potentially good councillor candidates are often turned off standing for local councils because they do not want to align with one political party or another – but it is very difficult for independents and 'greens' to stand to be elected."*

Group organisation

- Organise their groups so that all councillors feel valued and part of the decision-making process – a group that does not do this may drive backbench councillors away.
- Limit whipping to a narrower set of decisions, giving ward members more freedom to act on ward issues, even if it sometimes conflicts with party views.
- Encourage political groups to rise above narrow party politics *"we should have the local relationships to enable council meetings to focus on ambition and delivery rather than process"*
- Ensure there is monitoring and support of new councillors by party groups, with monitoring of the performance of each councillor.

Parties' approach

- Acknowledge that some councillors feel alienated from their party's central HQ: *"Party politics makes my job as a councillor very frustrating – national [party] policies have little relevance to issues in my ward. But if we were all independents, then allegiances would form anyway and it would not be open and transparent, so I can't think of a better system."*
- Address the respective roles of constituency MPs and councillors to have agreed boundaries and avoid friction over ownership of local issues. Some councillors reported scenarios where an MP 'muscled in' on a local council issue and did not appear to value the distinctive contribution of local councillors.

Session 3 - The convening role of local councils

3.1 What can councils do to work more effectively and productively with other agencies and organisations?

Most councillors were positive about partnership working and took the view that Local Area Agreements (LAA's) had helped focus their local strategic partnerships. The key factors identified that would improve partnership working were:

- **Culture and behaviour of partners:** building trust, being transparent and avoiding a blame culture. *"The government should understand that partnerships (that deliver) can't just be created – it's down to individuals"*.
- **Leadership:** while there was agreement about the need for strong leadership - *"Someone needs to be in charge"* - there were differing views on where this should come from: Some asserted the council's prime role: *"Do not be embarrassed to have the local council in a central/convening role. They are democratic"*. Some councillors said that the LSP was best not chaired by a councillor *"while councils think they should run everything, partnerships won't work"*.
- **Performance management:** Councillors said that more local and fewer national targets would assist with partnership working, freeing local partnerships to be focused on genuine shared priorities.
- **Budgets:** There were concerns about how budgets are marshalled and managed at a partnership level. Some councillors were frustrated by reluctance amongst some partners to pool budgets and were looking for stronger powers to make this happen and to put resources behind agreed targets. Currently, councils' work to promote health was affected by the NHS funding crisis and creative use of budgets was required: *"A joint health needs assessment was undertaken (PCT/council), it was found that 40% of under 12 year olds in two wards didn't have a toothbrush. The police paid for the toothbrushes."*
- **Accountability:** Councillors believed that LSP arrangements needed to make up for the democratic deficit that they perceived in their partners: the PCT, police and fire services.

3.2 What should change to give local agencies/organisations more of an incentive to co-operate with councils?

The following changes were proposed:

- Better co-ordination of targets, especially national ones.
- More freedom to combine budgets.
- Powers for groups of councils at sub-regional level to work with partners over wider areas if appropriate.
- A duty to co-operate upon the council's main partners: *"we need to have directives saying they need to work with us"* but the softer factors of building relationships, learning behaviours that supported partnership and sharing a common culture seemed to be given equal weight.
- A strengthened scrutiny role.

Session 4 - Future funding of local government

4.1 What are the main barriers facing councillors in trying to manage pressures and making funding follow local priorities?

- **Political challenges:** Some councillors found it difficult to make radical shifts that they identified as necessary to meet objective need. They were daunted by what they saw as the increasing strength of single issue campaigns which they described as "nimby"
- **Ring fencing of funding and prescriptive national standards:** The lack of discretion in funding education, even with falling roles and a growing older population were an issue for many councillors. Adult social care was seen as an area where demand could never be met. National standards were seen as setting some councils impossible and irrelevant standards criticising *"Government initiatives which presume one size fits all and take no account of local differences"*. *"Direction and funding from the centre rather than locally cramps LA's style"*.
- **Lack of transparency of funding mechanisms** was cited as a problem for councils wanting to plan ahead.
- **Frequent changes in grant regimes** were cited as a problem for forward planning and in compounding lack of transparency.
- **Council tax capping:** There were very strong views about the unfairness of *this "capping on council tax disadvantages low spending authorities who want to improve", "we would like to be average! Capping prevents us ever catching up"*.
- **Lack of flexibility to spend on local priorities** such as affordable housing, street scene, public transport and the environment.
- **Lack of direct local benefit from growth in the business tax base,** for example *"My borough is economically vibrant but residents don't really benefit from this, because business rates go directly to central government. We suffer from issues such as congestion and parking in residential areas, but receive little benefit."*

4.2 What would you like to spend less on to free up resources for local priorities?

The main suggestions were:

- **Defending regulatory decisions** e.g. planning appeals.
- Having to respond to **legislation** without the funding to pay for it e.g. licensing.
- Expense of elaborate **bidding regimes** for funding.
- Some local authorities do not want to strive for CPA excellence in all areas, wanting to be 'just good enough' in some. Some councillors claimed to be prioritising some activities simply to "**tick inspection boxes**", subordinating what they saw as more important local priorities arising from specific local needs.
- "*We spend far too much money on making sure we meet **performance indicators**. You don't fatten a pig by weighing it!*".
- **Audit Commission fees** – some councillors claimed that for their council, these had gone up by more than the rate of inflation in the last few years.