

LYONS INQUIRY

into Local Government

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To Chief Executives of all English local authorities

By E mail

20th January 2006

Dear Chief Executive

I am writing to seek your assistance with my Inquiry in developing a clearer picture of the future role and functions of local government, in particular by drawing on your understanding of what the public want from local government. As you may know, I published a consultation paper and interim report on 15 December 2005. The full document is available to download on www.lyonsinquiry.org but a copy of the summary report is attached for your information. The report includes a number of questions on which I am particularly seeking responses by **Monday 13 March 2006** and I would welcome any formal response that your authority might wish to make to those questions. Please could you copy it to your leader, and note that I am also approaching the political parties through the LGA.

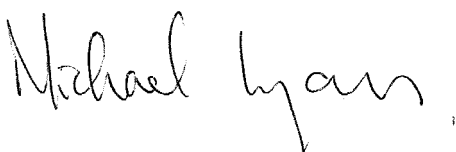
However, I am writing now to encourage you to engage with your local community and assist in providing information on some issues central to my Inquiry's remit. In my view, the timing is auspicious - I sense we are approaching a "tipping point" towards consensus around the need for change for local government. But in order to make that change a reality I believe it is essential that an informed debate be held with the public and that every council needs to engage in this debate. I am particularly interested in any written views and evidence that you can provide either through holding a public debate within your authority or in providing case studies relating to the three main issues central to my inquiry:

- The strategic role of local government;
- Devolution and decentralisation; and
- Funding.

In recent conversations and meetings I have been struck by your interest and enthusiasm for this agenda. I would like to emphasise that it is only through drawing on the evidence and information you can provide that I can ensure my work is robust and convincing to Ministers and the public. **Annex A** attached to this letter sets out in more detail how I would like your help. Some of you have asked me how these discussions relate to the agenda of David Miliband and his colleagues at ODPM. Whilst my work is independent, it is clearly in the common interest that my emerging thinking informs ministers work on related issues. I will therefore ensure that my clients, the Deputy Prime Minister & Chancellor are made aware of my ongoing work and consultation in order that they may take it into account when developing the local government white paper and indeed the comprehensive spending review.

If you are able to contribute to my work as set out in Annex A, I would be grateful if you could let me know on the above number by **Thursday 2 February 2006**. If you would like to discuss your contribution in more detail please contact my Inquiry team head, Sally Burlington, on 020 7270 5157.

Yours sincerely,



Sir Michael Lyons

From Sir Michael Lyons.

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Ways to assist the Inquiry

1) Public debate within your authority

Local government has always had a major and unique role to play in helping to define and deliver successful communities, making decisions and trade-offs on behalf of all local people, and developing a strategic view of the area and its future. I would welcome cross party views from within your council as to how successfully members feel that they fulfill this role and what, in their view, might make a difference. I have also made it clear in my interim report that it is essential to develop a better understanding of what the public want – as citizens, service users and taxpayers.

Many local authorities have citizens panels or fora, which might be well placed to provide that better understanding. Several of you will already be carrying out public engagement work in which we would be interested if you would be happy to share your results; if your authority and/or its citizens panel has already considered the role of local government or other issues of relevance to the Inquiry which has not already been submitted to the Inquiry we would be very happy to receive it by **13 March 2006**.

On the other hand, if you are about to consult or engage with your community - on budget issues, reorganisation or on other relevant topics - could this opportunity also be used to simultaneously ask about some of the key issues around the functions of local government, such as those identified below:

What is the strategic role of local government?

Covering such issues as:

- Which elements of this role extend beyond services for which the council is directly responsible?
- Does this role vary between different types of council?
- How could councils perform this role more effectively?
- How important is democracy or accountability in this process?
- What should local government do for local people and how can we ensure that it is fit for purpose?
- How has the government's approach to devolution and decentralisation affected local services?
- What are the barriers to public confidence – are there capability issues?
- What gives people in your area a sense of community?

Which services should meet national standards, which should meet minimum standards and which should be down to local choice?

Covering matters such as:

- What is the right balance between national standards and local variation?
- How has the Government's approach to decentralisation and devolution affected your authority and local services?
- How could responsibility for local services be made clearer between local government, central government and other agencies?

How can pressures on local services be managed more effectively?

Including:

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- Would greater devolution of responsibility enable pressures to be managed more effectively?
- What, in your area are the top three priorities for you as citizens (or councillors) given the cost of each of them to your authority?
- Does confusion about responsibility and duplication of effort contribute to pressures?
- If services were cost limited, how could they be prioritised?

Alternatively, you may be interested in setting up something more bespoke. I, and the team, would welcome the opportunity to learn from and engage in this work to inform my Inquiry and forthcoming publications. We will refine the questions we focus on as we develop our work and learn from our engagement with you and other colleagues. We are currently developing a more detailed public engagement strategy for use in a few councils and will be very happy to share this with you during February. If you would be willing to engage with the Inquiry team more interactively in this respect please contact Sally Burlington on 0207 270 5157 with your suggestion and timescale.

2) Providing specific case studies

Many of you will have implemented new and innovative ways of working at the local level that are of relevance to my inquiry. I am very keen to collate as many of these specific case study examples as possible. If you are able to provide information and evidence on any specific work you have carried out that might illuminate any of the issues above and which you would like to showcase or be happy for the Inquiry to use, please contact Alison Morris on 0207 270 5208 to discuss the most appropriate format and timescale to provide this in.

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