



Colchester Borough Council's response to the consultation paper: 'Lyons Inquiry into Local Government'

The Strategic Role of Local Government

1. What is the strategic role of local government?

The strategic role that is set out in the current consultation mixes some operational and strategic expectations. Our view of our role is to set and deliver an ambitious and exciting vision for the borough with Colchester 2020 (our Local Strategic Partnership), residents and partners. However, we also directly influence and lead on regional initiatives such as Regional Cities East and the Haven Gateway Partnership which tackle broader needs and issues such as infrastructure requirements. This is not reflected in the current definition which instead focuses on a confined view of resolving local housing development disputes and does not capture our cultural, social and economic ambitions adequately.

On the basis that 'local' means for us borough/district and parish councils, we believe that community leadership and the social and economic wellbeing duties embody our key strategic role. These two tiers of councils are best placed to turn local representation into local action with democracy most closely linked to people's lives.

We strongly believe that local government should not be just local administration of national priorities, but use its local mandate, knowledge and relationships to identify local needs and deliver on local priorities.

2. What tools do councils need to perform the strategic role more effectively?

We could be more effective if we were less accountable to central demands and more responsive to local needs. For example, if more of our resources were freed up from ring-fenced grant programmes with defined outcomes to allow us flexibility to resource according to our priorities we would be better placed to meet our residents' expectations.

Also, if we were able to retain a significant percentage of our business rates to reinvest in the borough through involving the business community in setting priorities this would be more effective than 'economic development' as a concept rather than action.

Another opportunity is to free Councils up from the current levels of inspection and targets moving to risk-based assurance which encourage self-awareness, local responsiveness and measuring what matters to the local community rather than how effective a process is. This should be accompanied by clearer expectations of performance rather than measures for everything to allow local government to govern locally.

3. How important is the fact that local government is elected in relation to its ability and legitimacy to perform this role?

This is paramount as the local electorate can voice its views on performance by voting to retain or remove its representatives.

We believe that other public services should also be more locally accountable such as the health sector to ensure they share local priorities and are not pulled in too many directions by potentially conflicting demands. The same democratic mandate could cover these services irrespective of whether they are delivered by one or more organisations.

Devolution and decentralisation

4. Which services (or parts of services) should meet national standards in all areas of the country?

We understand and support the need for some baseline standards in some service areas, for example recycling levels or the delivery of benefits. However, there needs to be more local determination over quality measures and service expectations, for example setting affordable housing levels according to need in the area, recycling ambitions above the baseline, sickness levels as part of a responsible approach to management, as the balancing of priorities and effective allocation of resources needs to make sense to local people.

The current restrictions on what is actually locally determined or the lack of flexibility in budget setting is confusing for the local electorate.

5. How has the Government's approach to devolution and decentralisation affected your area and your local services?

It has had minimal impact compared to those areas that have received considerable neighbourhood funding over a significant period of time, such as SRB funding for East Colchester.

We have pioneered a very successful scheme where we devolve decisions about capital funding of projects to Town and Parish Councils where they assess and allocate schemes collectively. However, these councils have been reluctant to take on more responsibility for direct service provision with anxieties over cost, resources and skills levels, accountability and so on.

Further devolution of responsibility to town and parish council level is likely to politicise this level of local governance.

Managing pressures on local services

6. How can pressures on local services be managed more effectively?

Residents' expectations are often fuelled by Central government promises but these need to be funded and deliverable at a local level. For example, the concessionary fares promise to people over 60 has translated into a significant direct cost to our council above the subsidy level meaning other services have to be cut to deliver the change.

The myriad of service targets are unrealistic and do not measure what we consider to be the important issues to our public i.e. the outcomes and impact not the inputs and processes.

Scope for a new agreement

7. How could responsibility for local services be made clearer between local government, central government and other agencies?

We believe that a local Public Service Board for Colchester would be a progressive step accountable to the Local Strategic Partnership and responsible for the delivery of Local Area Agreement outcomes. This would help to ensure joint accountability for public services without trying to explain the complex delivery arrangements to a public that just wants responsive, quality services.