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Lyons Inquiry into Local Government  
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In connection with the Lyons Inquiry Interim report and as our response to the Key Questions we wish to make the following comments on behalf of this Council. They result from discussions by the Council's Management Team and Cabinet.

### **The Strategic Role of Local Government:**

The questions raised under this heading are also being explored nationally through other approaches, for example the current consultation on Local Strategic Partnerships, the national Police force restructuring, and the debate recently reopened by ODPM on the case for local government reorganisation. We would be interested to have the Inquiry's view on how these approaches, added to the new ways of working already introduced through Local Area Agreements, fit with the work of the Inquiry.

We would value information on the timing of the Inquiry's findings in view of the fact that the Government's White Paper is to be published in Summer. The five 'key principles' of the White Paper are expected to be:

- Double devolution: Government to Councils, and Councils to neighbourhoods.
- Services centred on the individual.
- Improved strategic leadership and accountability for Councils.
- Bottom up accountability.
- Finance.

These principles seem to be the key concerns of your current Inquiry. In view of this will the Inquiry seek to conclude earlier than planned to fit in with the timing of the White Paper?

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The Inquiry's interim report states that 'central government is responsible for providing a framework and direction for the country as a whole...there can be tensions between national objectives and frameworks and devolution to a more local level'. We suggest that in addition to the pressures identified in the consultation document much of the pressures on services and other related difficulties experienced by local authorities are caused by the lack of a joined up approach to service delivery and customer focus at national level. There are many occasions when there appears to be a piecemeal approach, or even a conflicting one, because government departments have not worked together. There seems also to be a lack of understanding and appreciation of what has already been achieved by local authorities.

### **Devolution and Decentralisation:**

We agree with the report that 'there are powerful arguments for devolving power from central government to local communities'. However we believe that there needs to be a sound evidence base for any action taken in response to community concerns. A system of devolution would need these checks because public pressure can be created by the media and the disproportionate influence of vociferous minorities.

Some capacity building will need to be done, especially in areas where great need is combined with a lack of capacity to express it. Also whilst taking into account the full range of views from all sectors of society, local authorities would need to guard against consultation fatigue amongst the local population. The mechanisms for devolving power should be capable of being adapted to local circumstances.

National standards are undoubtedly needed to provide certain minimum requirements. There are some services where we welcome stringent standards, for example special educational needs, and some that can be determined locally, such as grass cutting frequencies and street cleansing. National initiatives that drive key improvements, such as those for recycling and energy efficiency, are welcomed as drivers for improvement. As a rule of thumb, personal or individual services should have stronger minimum standards, more rigidly applied. Where standards are applied, consultation will be key to ensure that local authorities are focusing on the right aspects of the issue and setting the right targets to meet those standards.

### **Managing Pressures on local services:**

We suggest that one way to manage the current pressures would be for local authorities to concentrate on neighbourhoods and populations of interest where our evidence proves the greatest and most urgent need. More innovative ways of working within authorities - such as agreements with partners and task-and-finish groups - would be helpful and should be encouraged and supported by central government. This would

support the modernisation agenda generally and the imperative to secure continuous improvement and efficiency savings in particular.

**Scope for a new agreement:**

We welcome the potential outlined in the report for allowing local authorities more freedom to determine local priorities, and the flexibility to react to local people's needs. Any new agreement between local government, central government and other agencies should make the role of local Councillors very clear. Also the respective accountabilities of local and central government and partners must be made clear.

We await with interest the responses to our queries, and hope for more clarity on how the results of the Inquiry will be assimilated into the government's overall change agenda.

**Pam Donnellan**  
Chief Executive

**Councillor Richard Smith**  
Leader of the Council