

Bracknell Forest Borough Council
Easthampstead House
Bracknell
RG12 1AQ

13 March 2006

Dear Sir Michael,

Bracknell Forest welcomes and is encouraged by much of the analysis presented in the Lyons Review Interim Report. The Council recognises the advantages afforded to the inquiry of widening its remit and hopes that the opportunities presented to both local and central government for improving outcomes for local people are taken.

Indeed it is "outcomes" which this Council believes are of greatest importance, and not process or bureaucratic electoral structures. Many of the changes introduced to the local government arena over recent years have undoubtedly led to increased complexity and created potential confusion regarding responsibility for where any particular service lies and has reduced the role of locally elected representatives. As such, whilst it is helpful, to focus on the strategic role of local government, we must always have at the fore-front of our minds how we can maximise the outcomes for our citizens through the delivery of excellent services which match the needs and priorities of our local community.

As such we agree with the observation that giving more power and choice about local services to local government could lead to better local services. We also recognise the view that this "local advantage" can only be realised if the ability and capacity of authorities to design services to meet local preferences involving real accountability to local people actually exists.

The Council recognises the importance of national standards both in avoiding variability in areas where the public expect to receive equal access to provision (notably social care, health and education) and in tackling under provision arising from deprivation. However the balance of national priorities and local autonomous decision making needs to be re-examined in an open and responsible manner. An extensive dialogue needs to take place at a local and national level, taking into account the views of local communities, in order to explore whether a consensus can be reached on which services should be most closely aligned with national standards and priorities. These can then be addressed in a context that allows the remaining local priorities to be met with locally accountable solutions.

This debate can be progressed by taking the approach of focusing on outcomes, rather than trying to identify a series of detailed targets or initiatives. Much has been learnt by both local and central government as part of the Local Public Service Agreements (LPSA) regime and latterly by the Local Area Agreements (LAA). Indeed looking at the evolution of some recent LAAs that have utilised the five high-level "outcomes" set within the "Every Child Matters" framework could provide a productive way forward. This provides a good example for the potential of unifying national and local targets based around a framework of a manageable number of key outcomes.

It is incumbent on all parties to the future local government arrangements to avoid the dissipation of effort that can result from excess bureaucracy and process. Though not painless, Bracknell Forest can now look back over the last 8 years as a Unitary Authority and identify the benefits that have been realised following reorganisation.

These benefits have flowed directly from the closeness to the community across all services that was missing from a two-tier structure.

In addition to the efficiency gains achieved by Unitary status and the resultant avoidance of duplication, the Council is better placed to identify the needs of the whole community, establish a local debate on the priorities and develop local solutions. Equally the closer relationship between the electorate and the local decision takers enables the impact of local decisions and actions to be more visible and transparent.

Where difficult choices must be made, the public has a right to know who is making them, how they are being made and what they can do to influence the outcome. A system that relies on a multitude of performance targets and indicators driven by the centre in order to achieve national priorities that may or may not be aligned to local needs does not provide a framework for success. Over time authorities become more adept at putting in place the performance management systems necessary to demonstrate the alignment of local and national goals, whilst struggling with a financial system that introduces greater complexity and the entrenchment of the “targeting” of funds. These tensions bubble to the surface when authorities are faced with managing the pressures from cost-intensive demand-led service (childrens services, people with learning difficulties) whilst being unable to protect other, often locally-demanded, services, due to imposed financial constraints.

With the constraint of a financial system that denies authorities the ability to set local tax levels freely and responsibly, combined with a plethora of national priorities and standards instigated by separate central government departments, it is not difficult to see why perceptions of ineffective local leadership and voter frustration exist.

Solutions

Leadership demands vision and ambition, and the new initiatives and policy debate highlighted in the current “double devolution” proposals should not be too heavily criticised. However a case can be made for the lack of recognition for the increasing role of partnerships and with it the risk of a loss of democratic accountability and potential public support. Furthermore it is clear that much still needs to be achieved in the spectrum of devolving substantive freedoms and flexibilities from central to local government.

Significant progress has been made with LPSAs and this is being built upon with the evolving LAAs. However there is work to be done on both sides in terms of moving away from the “silo” mentality of the major central Government spending departments and a more entrepreneurial attitude of Local Authorities to maximise the freedoms and flexibilities on offer.

We are confident that the approach taken in the most successful LAAs provides the future framework for the delivery of local services across England. At their foundation should be an “outcome-centric” approach whereby agreement is sought on a limited number of key national priorities that focus on specific cross-departmental outcomes. This would then form the basis of LAAs that would be agreed by service-delivery partners with the appropriate level of performance indicators agreed as necessary.

This can be supported, following a debate led by the Lyons Inquiry involving central and local government alongside the wider community, by determining a list of services that should meet national standards. These could then form a contractual agreement between central and local government that could be used to clearly communicate to the public the relationship between local services, local leadership and resource allocation.

These services and their related performance management indicators would also form the framework by which each Council's performance could be measured by central government, freeing up Local Authorities to engage with its local community to establish local indicators by which it would be judged.

Funding

Such a regime needs to be supported by a "fairer" funding system. This fairness is unlikely to be wholly delivered through modification to the funding formula. With a finite pot of central financial support and the recognition that some level of resource equalisation will be needed, there will always be winners and losers supported by plausible arguments as to why resources should be distributed in one way or another.

The aim of achieving fairness will be better served when Local Authorities are able to freely, but responsibly, set Council Tax levels without the constraint of capping. The robust arguments, noted in the Interim Report, have been well made for the abandonment of capping, and Bracknell Forest believes that this is a prerequisite for Councils to move forward and deliver on both its strategic role and its role of delivering local services. As a starting point the Government needs to make good on its promise of excluding those authorities judged "excellent" (or equivalent) in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment from the capping regime – the renegeing of this promise did much to diminish the sense of trust between local and central government in terms of delivering a future funding system based on joint responsibility. The inability to deliver on this flexibility will say much for the future relationship between local government and the centre.

Conclusion

The Local Government Information Unit highlights the disappointment shared across local authorities of the Government's inability to deliver on the European Charter of Local Self-Government. The Charter stresses the right of local authorities to regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs in the interests of local people. An effective central / local partnership would understand and acknowledge respective spheres of influence and place limits on the extent of central government influence. The Charter also enshrines the concept of subsidiarity, which provides that public responsibilities shall generally be exercised by those authorities which are closest to the citizen. This seems to offer a unique starting point for further discussion.

An open debate, led by the Lyons Inquiry, needs to be undertaken to seek agreement on which services are best provided to nationally set standards and which could be devolved further. This should then lead to the development of a simpler agreement between central and local government on a key set of outcomes to be achieved and a less bureaucratic performance-management framework, leading to authorities having the necessary freedoms and flexibilities to deliver local solutions to local problems and aspirations.

Local Authorities should be free to set local levels of taxation through the abolition of the capping regime.

Yours sincerely

Timothy Wheadon
Chief Executive