

Lyons Inquiry Future Role and Functions of Local Government

Response of Bridgnorth District Council

1.0 *What is the Strategic Role of Local Government?*

- 1.1** The key strategic role of local government is to provide effective community leadership underpinned by robust community engagement; identification and prioritisation of community needs; development of sustainable policies to improve the physical, economic and social infrastructure of local communities; influencing and working in partnership with other bodies to deliver community priorities; holding other organisations to account for their contributions to community governance and their service performance; protecting the interests of all sections of the community through effective and transparent regulatory activity; and acting as advocates for, and promoting the interests of, the communities served.
- 1.2** All councils must demonstrate effective community leadership, regardless of type or size, if they are to provide effective local government. The current debate around the future of local government is being dominated by arguments over structure, size and unitary status. Yet these arguments are spurious until a council's role and functions have been identified and a balance is drawn between strategic and local governance demands.
- 1.3** Within Shropshire, discussions have commenced on the future shape of local government locally. Bridgnorth District Council is keen to play an active part in these discussions and to ensure that there is an open, informed and evidence-based determination of the best arrangements for the county. These arrangements must be founded on clear understanding of local government's role and functions and have the needs of local communities and the delivery of high quality, sustainable and cost-effective services at the heart of their development.
- 1.4** Effective community leadership requires improved communication with communities (not just talking to, but listening and acting upon), greater transparency in the way that decisions are reached and greater autonomy for councils to identify their communities' needs and priorities as opposed to national prescription and a one-size fits all set of standards and targets.
- 1.5** Local democratic accountability is essential to the strategic role of local government. Too many times Councils are required to pursue policies or undertake work that is not a local priority and that utilises financial resources that could otherwise have been directed towards local needs. A prime example of this is the housing options appraisal exercise that very few people wanted, was undertaken at

great expense, and resulted in tenants expressing strong support for the retention of the Council's housing management role. Councils need the freedom and ability to act independently of central dictate to represent and promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of their local communities. With this freedom comes responsibility, allowing councils to be judged on their performance in meeting community needs and priorities. The ultimate test of fitness for purpose is via the ballot box. The move to create regional police forces, LSC's, probation and health authorities raises further issues for democratic accountability and requires mechanisms to be put in place to provide effective, democratic scrutiny of these bodies via local councils.

- 1.6** The Government's approach to devolution and decentralisation has had little impact in rural areas. Much of the focus of Government policy has its origins within the urban environment and is not always relevant and appropriate to rural areas.
- 1.7** Barriers to public confidence include poor communication and engagement, lack of transparency and accountability, absence of responsiveness and innovation, inability or unwillingness to involve and empower communities and poor service performance. Some of these can be explained by issues of capacity and capability (not least arising from the Government's funding and capping regimes) but others are more a question of attitude and behaviour demonstrated locally.
- 1.8** People's sense of community within the Bridgnorth district arises from feelings of pride and loyalty to place, culture, shared interests and identity. District boundaries help to reinforce these communities of interest and the loss of these boundaries could serve to promote feelings of alienation within local communities who would find themselves absorbed within a much wider and diverse community grouping.

2.0 Which Services should meet National Standards, which should meet Minimum Standards and which should be down to Local Choice?

- 2.1** Too many national standards and targets diminish local accountability, fetter Councils' ability to think and act strategically, and is damaging to the Council's ability to demonstrate community leadership. It is difficult for local taxpayers to accept that their money is being used to support national priorities, which they may not regard as priorities themselves, and that their local council has no discretion to deviate from this.
- 2.2** There is a role for national standards in ensuring provision of minimum levels of service in key areas eg education, social services, health, highways and waste management but these should be supported by central funding applied fairly and consistently across the country.
- 2.3** Accountability and responsibility for local services are important for reasons identified throughout this response. The current debate around role and functions will hopefully provide clarity on these

points. It is important to remember however that increasingly local government is not just a question of direct service provision. Other forms of service provision eg externalisation, joint commissioning etc are now commonplace and councils must also work in partnership with other agencies to ensure that wider community priorities are identified and delivered.

3.0 How can Pressures on Local Services be Managed more Effectively?

- 3.1** Greater devolution of responsibility coupled with an appropriate funding allocation would enable pressure on local services to be managed more effectively. Such an approach would also add accountability and autonomy for councils' to make informed local decisions and help improve public confidence. The link between responsibility and funding also needs to be properly addressed by Government in establishing new duties and requirements upon councils without unrealistic efficiency targets being built into grant allocations. For example, lessons need to be learnt from the wholly unrealistic self-financing approach to the new licensing regime.
- 3.2** A targeted, risk-based approach to audit and inspection would help to ensure that activity is focussed on those councils and services demonstrating under performance or other cause for concern and would help ease the burden for those councils' able to show a positive direction of travel in the financing, value for money, performance and delivery of their services.
- 3.3** The top three priorities for the bridgnorth district are as follows:
 - Supporting communities (affordable housing and safer, stronger communities);
 - Promoting the environment (waste minimisation, recycling and regulatory activities);
 - Improving the economy;All of these underpinned by the Council's overarching priority of putting the customer first.
- 3.4** Confusion about responsibility and duplication of effort can contribute to service pressures. Within three-tier areas confusion often exists over responsibility for street scene services. These services are best governed and delivered locally, closer to the people, as demonstrated by highway agency arrangements whereby districts provide county highway functions. The creation of a plethora of quangos at local, county and regional level have added to these concerns. However an effective LSP can help ensure that public and partner agencies (including parish and town councils) work with principal councils effectively in delivering community priorities, in a way that maximises the benefits of joint working and removes duplication.
- 3.5** Councils already face the need to prioritise services in the light of limited resources. Elected councillors are the appropriate body to undertake this task but this must follow from a robust analysis of local needs informed through meaningful dialogue and consultation with local people, community groups and partner agencies.

