



BOROUGH OF CREWE AND NANTWICH

Serving the Community

Executive Office

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Date: 13th March 2006

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BY E-MAIL TO :

**Sir Michael Lyons
The Lyons Inquiry Into Local Government**

Dear Sir Michael

I am responding to your invitation in your letter of 20th January. The points I will make are a result of a discussion between myself and the Leader of the Council. The Council itself has not debated the various issues outlined in your letter, nor has it instigated any public debate. However the Leader and myself have drawn upon a number of sources – the Annual Borough Public Debate and the results of various wide-ranging consultations – in arriving at a view.

The strategic role of local government is to do whatever is necessary (and legal) to further the well-being of the community it serves. It must act as the protector of, and advocate for, the community's overall interests. This includes anticipating future events and circumstances and preparing for them, and campaigning for resources to meet priority needs and giving leadership.

That leadership can take several forms. It may involve taking responsibility for transforming the community as a place – through regeneration, conservation, enhancement etc. It may involve taking a responsibility for transforming people's lives – giving them self-belief and the confidence that they can achieve, that they can bring about change, that they can progress. Tasks such as these cannot be delivered by local authorities in isolation. So this steers us towards a further form of leadership – that of co-ordinating the activities of the gamut of public services affecting a community; securing agreed objectives and aligning resources accordingly. This role of 'conducting the local orchestra' can only be an assumed one. And it is something that is achieved through persuasion and consensus –

through the management of the influence that is derived from the democratic mandate given to the Council's elected Members.

It is important to say more about Members at this stage. Successive White Papers, guidance notes and inspection regimes have concentrated on the managerialist agenda. The fact that local government has democratically elected Members sometimes seems to be incidental. And where the modern mantra does pay attention to elected Members it is invariably to make them more 'managerial' – slicker, more focussed, more effective. There is a real danger that the very essence of being an elected representative is going to be lost. If we are going to continue to have local government, as opposed to local administration, then more value has to be placed on the richness that elected Members can bring. They can represent interests better than most other mechanisms, they can interpret opinion, they can lead opinion. They add character, personality and vigour to the act of governance. We have to use the richness that the political process brings; not try to sanitise it or sideline it.

It is important to say something about life in a two-tier Shire system. It has always been a difficult way to operate, but these difficulties are becoming far more serious. Key government initiatives such as Local Public Service Agreements, Local Area Agreements and Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships or the Children and Young People agenda, are designed for unitary forms of local government. The operating requirements and the levels of understanding needed are complex enough for a unitary authority, but with a two-tier system far too much time and energy is being wasted in making sense of the 'cat's cradle' of linkages when it should be spent delivering positive outcomes on the ground. Further, the public simply do not understand the different responsibilities. We at the Borough Council are always blamed for the County's tax levels, and always blamed for the various responsibilities that belong to the County Council as Highway Authority. The Borough Council and the County Council occupy the same office building in Crewe. In a poll of customers leaving the building, 42% did not know which Council they had been in contact with. The two-tier system is well past its sell-by date.

In terms of relationships between central government and local government, perhaps the first point to make is about very poor levels of contact and communication. The degree of integration seems much better in Scotland and Wales and is more akin to the European mainland than to the English experience. Here in England, contact seems to be limited to administrative necessity. There is too little evidence of a real willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue – to share problems, help to share best practice or share ideas and ambitions. As a Chief Executive of 14 years I have been invited to the regional Government Office twice. This gulf between us needs to be breached. Various arrangements such as job swaps, job sharing, shared projects etc could help to break down barriers.

The only example which can be cited to you of how this Council has enjoyed any additional freedoms or flexibilities from central government is that we no longer have to submit a Capital Strategy Statement every year.

The regional framework is being strengthened – strategic health authorities, the Learning and Skills Council, Fire Service, Ambulance Trusts, housing strategy economic development strategy and Police Services are moving in that direction. This process of regionalisation is bereft of democratic overview. This does present difficulties for Members in local government to exert any real influence in these regional organisations and the significant decisions that they take. Any devolution that takes place from central government to the regions will therefore not make very much difference in practice.

In terms of clarifying responsibility for services, there is a danger in over-emphasising the point. Many people either do not know or are just not interested in who does exactly what. They elect people to sit on the Council, they pay their taxes direct to the Council and they simply want the Council to 'get it sorted out'. A straightforward service provider may simply say to the customer that it is not their responsibility and they should talk to one or more other providers. But our customers are also citizens. So we have a duty as local government to see if we can get a problem sorted out irrespective of where the operational responsibility actually lies. Whilst service provision is important, local government is more than just another utility provider. Our citizens not only say do it for me (provide the service) but they also say 'fix it for me' - help to overcome a difficult problem that goes well beyond a standard operation. Or they may even say – 'be there for me'. They expect the Council to be concerned about a wide environmental issue, about future prosperity or a number of quality of life issues. Perhaps we have concentrated too much on defining and measuring the service provision, and paid too little attention to how we serve people in their citizen capacity.

The top three priorities for this Council are not dissimilar to most. The 'liveability' agenda is very important. Residents consistently place a high priority on cleanliness, feeling safe and having things for young people to do. A second priority relates to the social justice agenda – closing the gap between the have and the have-nots. The third priority relates to creating prosperity and seeing that all parts of the community are given access to it.

A note of welcome, but also of caution, about the new agenda for community engagement and involvement. The principle is fine, and many communities will benefit and thrive on what it can bring. However, there are issues around the capacity of some communities to engage effectively and to self-organise. Unless there are specific arrangements made, the gap between the haves and have-nots could increase. There is also the issue of accountability. Public money is being spent and there is a responsibility for due care and diligence in how facilities are operated. Careful thought needs to be given as to how probity is observed, how health and safety obligations are met and how expected outcomes are achieved and sustained over time. It would be irresponsible for primary local authorities to undertake extensive devolution to local neighbourhoods and communities without ensuring that the appropriate frameworks were in place. But by the same token, the imposition of these frameworks must not be so onerous as to suppress the spirit of community enterprise and engagement that we are trying to encourage. This is a weak area of ODPM thinking at present and needs to be made more substantial.

Looking at local government finance, most people will not know any of the detail, but they do sense that local Councils have lost much of their power and discretion. They wonder whether it is worth bothering to vote for, or make representations to a Council which has so little room for manoeuvre. That in turn can damage a Council's standing and can detract from its ability to lead the community. A great deal of inspection work has taken place in recent years to establish any Council's overall level of competence. Indeed, the recent Use of Resources assessment has been a very tough test of financial competence. We now know who is a 'safe bet'. That knowledge should now be used to confer greater degrees of financial discretion to those Councils which reach a required level of competence.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alan Wenham', with a horizontal line underneath.

Alan Wenham
Chief Executive