

BRECKLAND COUNCIL



Response to Lyons Enquiry Consultation (December 2005)

Approved by Cabinet 4th March 2006

The strategic role of local government

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Q1. What is the strategic role of local government?

We agree with the broad strategic role outlined in paragraph 5.19 of the summary, but would add:

- *managing the locality better, with a stronger role in co-ordinating other public service providers;*
- *engaging in debates with organisations from all sectors: private, public and community.*
- *A strategic approach to regulation, through, for example, licensing and planning powers;*
- *Helping to promote key issues of concern within the community, beyond the 'traditional' scope of local government;*
- *Building new opportunities to promote change, as well as responding to challenges.*

Q1a: Which elements of this role should extend to services for which local government is responsible, and how?

As above; the strategic role should extend to ensuring better cohesion between all public sector agencies, ensuring better efficiency and effectiveness by eliminating duplication and better co-ordination of services.

Q1b: How does the strategic role vary between different types of councils?

District councils are currently closer to the community within the two-tier structure. Any proposals for reorganisation need to make sure this is not lost – strategy cannot be divorced from localism. Strategy that is not based on day-to-day experiences of local people is of little use; big councils with administrations remote from their communities are not the answer.

Local government reorganisation needs to leave district councils as the unitary authorities in their area. Strategic services could be run by smaller councils working in partnership.

Q2: What tools do councils need to perform the strategic role more effectively?

Some of the 'tools' may not be about direct powers, but the ability to commission services and a framework that allows them to work together, both between different authorities and between different public service providers. But more importantly, future funding formulae need to recognise the problems of rural areas and small 'pockets' of deprivation

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that have not traditionally been recognised in the way Government funds local authorities.

Q2a: What are the existing barriers to councils performing this role effectively?

The two-tier structure militates against strategic thinking – neither county nor district councils are in a position to think strategically across all services. Nor, for that matter, can any council think strategically across all sectors. But county councils, or unitary authorities on existing county boundaries, are too remote from the communities they serve. Unitary districts (either individually or in partnership) need to be given the powers to co-ordinate all public sector agencies, and to consider the scope and scale of all public services needed across their area, and how these can be provided or commissioned most effectively and efficiently to meet local needs.

Q2b: In what circumstances does it work well and less well?

It works well at present where co-ordinating powers are in place, or where there is a seamless relationship between the council and other providers or commissioning bodies. It works less well where providers have no working relationship, where the relationship is 'one step removed' (ie via another body) or the strategic responsibilities are unclear.

Q2c: Are further improvements in performance, efficiency and accountability needed before local government can most effectively play this strategic role and be trusted to do so?

In principle, no, although it depends to some extent on individual councils. What is really needed is further devolution of powers from central government to local government, at a district level where councils are more in touch with their communities.

Q2d: What are the key signs of success and failure?

Customer satisfaction, not just with council services but across all public services and general satisfaction with the local area. At present, councils are frustrated in their attempts to improve general satisfaction by their lack of powers to co-ordinate and influence services beyond those which they provide. Nevertheless, rural councils such as Breckland have succeeded in providing high quality services with very limited resources – this needs to be recognised and the imbalance of funding between rural and urban areas correct.

Q3' How important is the fact that local government is elected in relation to its ability and legitimacy to perform this role?

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Absolutely crucial! Being seen to be representative and part of the local population, and the ability of the local population to change this representation, is the foundation of local government's legitimacy, and gives it local credibility that does not exist in some other public bodies. Devolving power to 'neighbourhoods' makes little sense, and is based on an urban concept of how communities are organised. It doesn't work for rural areas and could never supplant the role of elected representatives in places where population densities are sparse and representation can only be achieved through some kind of elected representation – ie elected councillors, both at a district and parish level.

Q4: Which service or parts of services require national standards in all areas of the country? Which should meet minimum standards? Which should be entirely down to local choice?

Broadly speaking, statutory functions (especially regulatory functions) should be subject to national standards, with discretionary functions down to local choice – but with local consultation to ensure standards of service are locally appropriate.

Q4a: Are there aspects (such as standard setting, funding or choice of delivery mechanisms) of individual services which should be nationally controlled or locally controlled?

As above – yes to both.

Q4a: Are there services where greater local variation in standards would be acceptable if there were clearer accountability and consultation with local people?

Definitely yes. For non-statutory services, standards should be set through involvement of local people. For statutory, regulatory services, national standards are needed, but there may be some elements of some statutory services (for example, development control) where some element of local discretion would be (and already is) appropriate. Councils need to be given the powers and freedoms to decide on the levels of services appropriate to local people, with accountability both through local consultation and through the ballot box.

Q5: How has the Government's approach to devolution and decentralisation affected your area and local services?

Q5a: Which aspects of the current system are helpful and unhelpful, and why?

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Encouragement to local authorities to set up local area partnerships has been helpful – in Breckland, it has helped the council to involve and empower different communities across a large rural authority area. Similarly, strengthening the role of parish councils has made these a more useful tool for local consultation and involvement. However, we have yet to see much in the way of devolved powers from central to local government – we would like to see Government fulfilling their side of the deal. But while rural authorities have been able to adapt Government initiatives, such initiatives have suffered from an urban bias. A ‘one size fits all’ approach developed in and based around urban councils won’t work for councils such as Breckland.

Q5b: Have changes based on central government priorities differed from those that might have been driven by local pressure and opinion?

Yes – some central government initiatives, such as recycling, can be unpopular locally and would not necessarily have been driven by local pressures and opinion. Similarly, the pressure to build new homes, while supported in principle by local people, is often not so popular when it comes to earmarking sites for development. There will always be a need for strategic policies to override local opinion, where the policies are for the recognised greater good. But such policies need to be appropriate for the local government area and the region. Forcing a ‘neighbourhood’ agenda on councils is unlikely to be popular as it simply won’t work in some areas. There is little evidence that local people want to get involved in running services, particularly where any identifiable ‘neighbourhood’ would comprise only a handful of people. What they want is good quality services delivered according to their priorities and needs at a cost they are willing to pay; they do not necessarily want to get involved in providing them themselves.

Q6. How can pressures on local services be managed more effectively?

Q6a: What are the main types of pressures faced by local services and how are they currently managed?

Capacity to deliver is the main pressure – lack of sufficient funding and resources. Traditionally, this has been managed through the dedication of staff to cope with such pressures, but more recently, through partnerships with other authorities (for example, in Breckland, with the Anglia Revenues Partnership). But again, rural councils have suffered from a disproportionate lack of funds for decades.

Q6b: Which are the most difficult to manage and why?

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Services with tightly defined statutory standards, where there is no flexibility in the level of service provided, will always be under the greatest pressures. But there are also pressures from the local community for services where the Council does not have the capacity to provide a level of service that meets local expectations. In some ways, such services are harder to manage because of the expectations of local people and tax levels they are willing to accept.

Q6c: Would greater devolution of responsibility enable pressures to be managed more effectively?

Yes, as long as appropriate devolved funding accompanies the responsibilities. Devolving powers to unitary districts, working in partnership with their town and parish councils and with their neighbouring districts, is the most workable solution.

Q6d: Do confusion about responsibility and duplication of effort contribute to pressures?

Yes It is difficult for the public to understand the constraints and limitations under which councils operate, especially in technically complex areas such as development control. Furthermore, people are confused about which tier of council runs services, and tend to blame the council that sends out the tax bills for all failures in local government services and all council tax increases. This is bad for democratic accountability and leads to a dissatisfaction with local government generally as local people see any attempts to explain who pays for what as buck-passing.

Q6e: Would greater public understanding of the actual cost of public services help to manage expectations and pressures?

Yes, although it's difficult to know how this could be achieved. Councils already put a lot of effort into informing the public about where their council tax goes and what proportion of local services it provides, but few people understand this. Simplifying funding would make it easier for the public to understand, and would make it easier to manage expectations. But, as noted above, it is difficult for the public to understand a two-tier system.

Q6f How can we assure that the system provides the proper incentives and rewards for using resources efficiently?

Some sort of external review of value for money will always be necessary. But local people need to be involved in this, as part of an effective judgement of cost effectiveness. For this to work though, funding needs to be simplified so they can understand what they get for their money.

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Q7. How could responsibility for local services be made clearer between local government, central government and other agencies?

This has been covered in the responses above. Clearer co-ordinating responsibilities resting with councils and more powers devolved to them.

Q7a: What might this mean for the current performance management framework?

Nothing specifically – a good performance management framework could be adapted to encompass any services and responsibilities, and would bring these all under an umbrella of a common set of aims and objectives. Nationally, this would make the development of a ‘new performance framework’ based around local priorities easier to achieve.

Q7b: Would a more contractual approach for a small number of key central priorities help to achieve this?

Yes, possibly, but it would depend on quite what was meant by a ‘more contractual approach’.