

HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**Response to the Lyons Inquiry
March 2006**

1. Hertfordshire County Council welcomes the opportunity to participate in this consultation and the debate of which it forms a part.
2. We recognise and support the concept of “place-shaping” in encapsulating the strategic role of local government, although we would suggest that at least two more elements be added.
3. First, we feel it is important that the role of local government in promoting social inclusion and supporting vulnerable people is more explicitly recognised as integral to the Community Leadership role.
4. Second, we also believe that working with other bodies to resolve complex challenges should extend beyond natural disasters and other emergencies to include other longer term challenges which are beyond the competence of any single body. This would build on the Local Area Agreement concept, and partnership working more generally, to tackle the so-called “wicked-issues” for our communities.
5. In order to perform this strategic role, local government needs to engage and develop strong working relationships with central government, local partners and other public agencies and, above all, its citizens. This role will require risk taking and responsiveness to local needs, and will unfold as the current LSP review takes shape, and as LAA strengths and weaknesses are assessed. However, what is apparent is that developing these relationships requires a genuine commitment not only from local government, but also at a national level.
6. Hertfordshire has submitted a single agreed response to the LSP review (copy attached for reference)
7. Barriers to the effective performance of the strategic role include complications caused by local government and other public services not being coterminous, the conflicting priorities of different public agencies, the contradictory agendas of central government departments, and the role of regions as unelected administrative units. Nevertheless we are clear that developing added value for our communities requires us to strive for success and to work with whatever structures are in place.
8. Whilst we acknowledge that there is always likely to be a degree of tension between the desires for uniformity of national services and variations according to local priorities, we believe that central government needs to demonstrate trust in local authorities to deliver services according to the needs of the local community. In turn, our

“place-shaping” role requires us to engage with local people, to whom the County Council should be ultimately accountable.

9. Recognising local needs and local solutions within Hertfordshire can be illustrated by the ‘Hertsmere Community Partnership’, a grass roots partnership project responding to local need through collaboration. The partnership itself is writing up a case study on the experience so far, which will be submitted to the Inquiry in due course.
10. Whilst partnership working is critical in dealing with complex problems, it is also vital to ensure that a clear link between the ballot box and decision-making is maintained at all levels of governance. The potential for local elected members to adopt a broader role as genuine community advocates is an essential part of any move towards truly democratic local government.
11. We therefore support the principle of elected representatives monitoring and scrutinising the local delivery of public services in addition to strengthening and redefining the role of backbenchers and opposition members as reflecting the voice of the local community within the local strategic partnership context.
12. In demonstrating Community Leadership at the strategic level, the elected body, with a local mandate, is best placed to address and balance the potential tensions between conflicting interests of localities, public agencies and other partners.
13. In many areas very little has been devolved or decentralised. Indeed, in some cases, there has been upward movement where there are examples of increasing centralisation or regionalisation. Furthermore, in those areas which have experienced devolution, there have frequently been excessive central government constraints (for example, the lack of flexibility on the way ‘Supporting People’ operates). The enablers promised within the LAA regime nationally have failed to materialise, and this frustrates those making local business cases, the very people we need on board for the bigger agenda.
14. We agree that for some services it is right that there are national minimum standards which should be met. However, in others, whilst national frameworks can be helpful, it is local priorities that are important. For those services, so long as Councils are able to demonstrate that the quality and volume of services delivered accord with local choice, then a national approach need not be adopted, and developing genuinely local PIs may be most appropriate.
15. Implicit in this is the need to accept and support variations according to those choices and acknowledge that the funding of local government should reflect the preferences of local communities.

16. Agreement between national and local government should focus on outcomes, leaving local authorities flexibility with regard to preferred delivery methods. Such agreement would move away from high levels of national prescription over targets and standards which can marginalise innovation and be damaging to perceptions of local accountability.