

The Lyons Enquiry

Presentation to Durham County Council
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March 2006

research
knowledge
strategy
imagination

WoodHolmesGroup
Positive action born of understanding



Background to the Project

- Sir Michael Lyons commissioned by the Government to look into how local government is funded
- Remit extended to also look at the role and function of local government
- Inquiry will feed into the Government's decision on reform of Council Tax and also a White Paper on Local Government
- Wood Holmes commissioned by Durham County Council to run a public consultation exercise that will inform the Council's input to the Lyons Enquiry and its contributions to the White Paper



Research Approach

- Members of the County's Citizens Panel who had previously expressed an interest in attending group sessions were invited to attend
- 17 members of the panel actually attended. They came from across the County:

Pity Me (x2)	Sedgefield	Stanley
Crook	Carrville (x2)	Newton Hall
Seaham	Gainford	Lanchester
Brasside	Burnopfield	Durham City
Wheatley Hill	Newton Aycliffe	Peterlee

- One two hour session was run on 6 March 2006 with all 17 respondents



The sample

- The nature of the respondents should be noted and should set the context for any interpretation or use of the findings of this research
- The sample was not representative inasmuch as:
 - Respondents were self selecting (they were already panel members, and were not incentivised to attend, although they received travel expenses)
 - Several had attended previous sessions run by the Council, mainly regarding budgeting
 - They were predominantly of retirement age (with only one or two exceptions)
 - Only 5 of the 17 were women
 - Many were active in their local communities and councils
- As a result, compared with the (independently recruited) residents who took part in the research conducted for Durham County Council in June 2004, the respondents for this work were significantly more knowledgeable about, interested in and involved with local government



The Findings:

What Makes a Good Area to Live In



What makes a good place to live?

- There was general consensus that the elements of a good place to live do not all need to be on the doorstep...
- ...but, importantly, that the infrastructure must enable easy and safe access to facilities
- Several of the first things mentioned concerned the general environment, rather than specific services:
 - Personal safety
 - Sense of community
 - Natural environment
 - Free of antisocial behaviour
- Noticeably, the most top-of-mind things they like about their own area are also not associated with direct services (detailed later)



What makes a good place to live?

- 'Excellent services' was then mentioned, prompting a number of specific facilities that are needed to make a 'good place to live':
 - Doctors, schools, post offices, transport, community centres, libraries, leisure facilities, housing, churches, no litter, shopping
- Respondents tended not to be in agreement with the necessity of all of these facilities, particularly the 'non-universal' services such as churches and community centres



What makes County Durham a good place to live?

- The **natural environment** is a key asset for these Durham residents. Some of the things they like most about their area are:
 - It's not overcrowded
 - It's peaceful
 - Diversity of environment (coast, countryside etc)
- Linked to this idea of being **less 'urbanised'** as an area, are a number of positive attributes:
 - Clean air
 - Clean water
 - Less traffic
- The **geography** is also a plus:
 - Convenient to travel to the countryside...or anywhere
 - Good road / rail network



What makes County Durham a good place to live?

- There was some discussion about the relatively good cost of living in the area, with the availability of reasonably priced housing
- Some traditional 'north east values' cropped up:
 - Friendly people
 - History
- Services and facilities mentioned as positive attributes included:
 - Universities
 - Hospitals
 - Access to professional sport / entertainment
 - Shopping
 - Communications from local bodies
- One (younger) respondent felt that business support in the region is good, as well as there being access to a good workforce and business suppliers



What can be improved about the place I live?

- The key themes for improvement for this set of residents are typically quite strategic in nature, although mostly driven by personal agendas:
 - The **attraction, retention and support of industry** and businesses in the area
 - To provide employment
 - To bring inward investment and thus benefit residents
 - To **encourage young people to stay in the region** to provide a skilled workforce
 - To maintain the heart of the community by **encouraging local and traditional retailing** (ie discourage out of town development)
 - To improve the physical environment of town centres by minimising empty and derelict sites



What can be improved about the place I live?

- To **improve and take care of the natural environment**
 - including litter management and the 'beautification' of towns and villages...
 - ...something seen as a simple and relatively inexpensive initiative which brings intangible but valuable benefits for residents
- To **encourage community building** including
 - the support of voluntary groups (not necessarily financial);
 - the provision of care in the community
 - the provision of IT links to encourage home-working
- The introduction of a **more flexible approach to decision making** by councils to allow for each situation to be evaluated on its merits



Understanding of, and Attitudes to Local Government



Understanding of roles and responsibilities

- Everyone in this group knew the councils that service their particular area
 - ...although there may be some confusion that you can be in a parish, but not have a parish council
- Most seem to identify more with – or feel closer to - their District Council
 - Many are interacting with their District Council reasonably frequently, often face to face
- Some, but not all perceive a distance between them and the County Council:
 - “I don’t want to be ringing the County Council if my bin’s not collected...I want to go and stand on the (District) Council’s doorstep if I need to”
 - The distance may be more than geographic (ie the relationship is distant)



Understanding of roles and responsibilities

- There were also high levels of awareness amongst this group of the broad areas of responsibility held by the different councils
- However, despite top level awareness of council responsibilities, confusion still exists as to what role each council plays in the delivery of a shared service area
 - For example social services, tourism, elections
 - No-one thought that 'Fire' was the responsibility of any Council
- Strategic 'place shaping' responsibilities were generally seen to be a responsibility of both the District and County Councils and there was a general acceptance that these would be taken care of
- Some were mentioned spontaneously
 - regulation of harmful/disruptive behaviours
 - support of the local economy



Understanding of roles and responsibilities

- There was little comment about councils working together or in partnership, and not much thought about, or recognition of the different roles required to deliver a certain service (e.g. strategic planning, consultation, setting of standards, actual delivery)
- This confusion can lead to a perception of 'buck passing' between the councils and resulting frustration amongst residents
- It also creates a perception of:
 - Duplication (triplication?) of effort
 - Split focus
 - Unnecessary expense
 - A tension between councils (some comments that this was healthy)



Perceptions of local authorities

- There was little overall complaint from this audience about the quality of services being delivered by local councils (although truly speaking no focus was really put on performance in this respect)
- Complaints were more centred around the lack of clarity and the lack of transparency of roles and responsibilities
- The quality of councillors' performance was debated and is perceived as very patchy
- These residents are suspicious and untrusting of councils, their behaviour and motivations
- Importantly, they see regional government as 'on the agenda' and perceive it as a threat to local decision-making



What is the ideal?

- Three options were discussed:
- **Unitary and local councils** (separate entities)
 - Is 'unitary' at county or district level?
 - Emotional attachment to County Durham, but fear dislocation from decision making; district feels better for some; county feels better for others but all wanted more local-decision making

➤ How do we define the grass roots locations?

Pros

- We would know the local council
- Economies of scale
- Minimisation of duplication
- Strategic overview
- More cost efficient (than current structure)
- A stronger body

Cons

- Risk of distance
- Lack of local input
- More power with fewer people
- Lack of access
- Costly?



What is the ideal?

- Three options were discussed:
- **Running the county as a business**
 - (although not necessarily a 'serious' consideration, this throws up some interesting issues)

Pros

- Economics
- Run by professionals

Cons

- Accountability
- Who would hire and fire
- How would communities be consulted



What is the ideal?

- Three options were discussed:
- **Maintaining the status quo**
 - This would only be acceptable if there were a clear and transparent demarcation or responsibilities

Pros

- No more passing the buck
- No Igr expense
- Minimisation (but not eradication?) of duplication
- Grass roots involvement

Cons

- Many of the current problems would remain
- What would really change?
- There would inevitably still be some duplication of effort and expenditure



Leadership and Elections



Leadership and Elections

- Most knew that the District and County Councils had a leader and cabinet
- There is an issue with the quality and diversity of councillors currently
- Desire to encourage (maybe by incentivising) a wider range of people to become involved in terms of age, ethnicity, cultural background
- There were mixed opinions about elected Mayors, but some felt it would give the electorate a real opportunity to 'rebel' against the traditional political party offering
- However, most agree that they didn't feel the need to elect councillors to specific roles
- Party politics is blamed for obstructionism and lack of co-operation amongst councillors and within councils; particularly in regard to minority parties being able to be fully involved



Summary



Summary

- This group had a good awareness of the current structure of local government and the way responsibilities are apportioned – at a top level
- Confusion lies where broader areas of responsibility are shared - creates negative perceptions of duplication of effort and expense, passing the buck, lack of focus
- Minimal acknowledgement of partnership working or co-operation enhances negative perceptions
- No consensus on 'ideal' approach, with individuals having better and worse relationships with all types of councils across the board, and certainly focused on their own personal agendas



Summary

- The key issues for these residents lie in being able to influence and shape their own lives
- They want:
 - A 'voice for the community'
 - To make their own decisions
 - To be able to access authorities locally
 - Grass roots decision making and involvement
- Also...
 - A stronger voice for the area
 - To resist regional government
 - To 'stand up' to national / central government
- The definition of a 'grass roots' or 'local' area is a difficult one, and not easily resolved. Much depends on the urban / rural nature of the locality



What residents want : Summary

- The community (the definition of which is constantly variable, from village to county) is all important
- This group are looking to local government not only to 'supply' services to the community – which must be 'excellent'...
- ...but also to support and **nurture** community by creating a healthy economic climate and physical environment
- They also want 'excellent services'
- At the same time, there is a demand for
 - Cost efficiency (they are also aware of the costs of lgr)
 - Accountability
 - Responsiveness
 - Professionalism
 - Clarity
 - Transparency

