

17 March 2006

Sir Michael Lyons
c/o Lee Burge
Room 3.12
Lyons Inquiry into Local Government
1 Horse Guards Road
London
SW1A 2HQ

Councillor Raj Chada
Leader of the Council
Gospel Oak Ward
London Borough of Camden
Room 125, Civic Floor
Camden Town Hall
Judd Street]
London WC1H 9JE

Tel: 020 7974 5707
Fax: 020 7974 5698

www.leader@camden.gov.uk

Dear Sir Michael

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Interim Report of the Lyons Inquiry, and look forward to further outcomes to inform the debate as well as to your final report. Camden Council has considered the report at senior management as well as at Member level. Our response – attached in two parts following the structure of your report – was agreed by the council's Executive on 15 March 2006, and our Overview and Scrutiny Commission considered it as well.

Some key points to highlight in response to the proposals and consultation questions in part 1 on the role and function of local government are, first of all, that we are supportive of your formulation of a place shaping role for local government. For Camden, this strategic role strongly features promoting community cohesion and building social capital. I take the opportunity to enclose a recent publication – 'Sticking Together' – which we produced jointly with the Institute for Public Policy Research. It reflects on the outcomes of two major social capital surveys in Camden and is a contribution to an important debate for local government.

Secondly, we see strength in multi-purpose, elected and accountable local authorities that play a strategic leadership role but that also provide, as well as commission or 'orchestrate', a range of services.

A third key point is that we do not want our core relationship with government to be a contractual one, or one that puts us in the role of delivery agency for national programmes. While there is much potential in Local Area Agreements, we feel there needs to be a constitutional settlement between national and local spheres of governance.

Obviously there are many more points in the attached submission, which we hope are seen as useful perspectives.

Your points on the public's lack of understanding of local government, our services and their costs, are well made. We are currently preparing our next community strategy and attempting to have wide-ranging conversations with local residents and stakeholders. We would be happy to explore ways to include the debates you encourage councils to have in their areas. Through our CamdenTalks citizens panel of 2000 local residents we may be able to support further research of the Lyons Inquiry.

In part 2 of our submission we have laid out comments relating to local government funding. While we appreciate that it would be precipitous to make final conclusions before the wider issues of local government functions are resolved, we believe a number of key points can be made at this stage.

A serious issue is the lack of public understanding of local government responsibilities, costs and funding. Poor public perception of council tax, considered the most 'visible' tax, is causing distrust and erects a barrier between local government and meaningful interaction with the local population. It is therefore critical that a new funding system is equitable and easily understood, as well as affordable and sustainable in the medium and long term.

We would be happy to discuss any aspect of our response or ways in which we can contribute to your further research and a public debate on local government.

Yours sincerely



COUNCILLOR RAJ CHADA
Leader of the Council