



Our ref: CE/MKH

Sir Michael Lyons
Lyons Inquiry into Local Government
Room 3/12
1 Horse Guards Road
London
SW1A 2HQ

29th June, 2006

Dear Sir Michael,

Lyons Inquiry – views from Taunton Deane Borough Council

Over recent weeks, we have conducted our annual consultation exercise, seeking residents' views on their perception of the Council, our future priorities and spending plans. We took the opportunity to ask a number of the 'public engagement' questions pertinent to your Inquiry, and I would like to share the results of this exercise with you.

In addition, officers and elected members have been considering your report of 8 May 2006: *National prosperity, local choice and civic engagement*. Later in this letter, I would like to take up your invitation of providing views on this report.

Public Engagement

Over the period 8 May – 9 June 2006, we ran a consultation exercise entitled "Your Council, Your Views". A postal survey was sent to a random sample of 5,000 residents (our total population is 106,000). The survey was also promoted and available on the Council's website and various community information points throughout the Borough.

667 people responded to the survey and we are currently analysing the many detailed comments that people have taken the time to provide. A number of questions in the survey relate directly to your Inquiry. Please find enclosed a copy of the entire questionnaire, including response rates and some analysis of the Inquiry Questions. Headline messages as far as the Lyons Inquiry us concerned are that:

- A majority (47%) of respondents think that the Council is "good", with 5% rating us as "excellent".
- Generally, there is a fairly good understanding among respondents of the services provided by the Council. Exceptions to this include "attracting businesses and jobs", where only 38% see this as our

responsibility and “community safety” (37%). 53% of respondents incorrectly thought that we were responsible for running libraries.

- A minority of respondents (43%) know who their Borough Councillor is.
- Most respondents feel that their Borough Councillor is elected to “represent his/her constituents” and “attend council meetings”
- Most respondents had a positive perception of the Borough Council’s staff and elected members.
- 81% of respondents associate Taunton Deane (the place) with the Borough Council.
- A majority of respondents (46%) trust the Council, with 33% indicating “sometimes” and 20% indicating “no”.
- 91% of respondents had previously voted in local government elections.
- Respondents ranked ‘feeling safe in your neighbourhood’ (50%), ‘good local services’ (40%) and low crime levels (34%) as the top three things that make an area a good place to live.
- The majority of respondents (57%) think that Taunton Deane Borough Council should have the main responsibility for setting priorities for the area.
- The majority of respondents (60%) think that the Borough Council provides good value for money.
- The majority of respondents (63%) would prefer to see Council Tax increase at the rate of inflation rather than see cuts to local services.

This consultation represents part of our continuing effort to keep in touch with local needs and views, and we will certainly use the results to help shape our future priorities.

More detailed analysis of all responses will be available by the end of July. If you would like this more detailed analysis, please let me know and I will arrange for this to be provided.

Views on the report: *National prosperity, local choice and civic engagement.*

Overall, the Council is supportive of this report and the enhanced and substantive role it maps out for the future of local government.

We welcome your comment that “central and local government share an interest in developing a system which enhances the ability of public services

to respond to the needs of local people.” We believe it is right that councils should be given a clearer role in setting local priorities and standards of service, dependent on local circumstances. At Taunton Deane, we have worked hard to set a robust and outcome-focused Corporate Strategy, based on a clear understanding of local evidence, trends and the needs and aspirations of residents. Our Corporate Strategy sets the scene for sometimes difficult choices about the relative priority of different local services and we have already established a regular and mature dialogue with residents on this issue. Our Corporate Strategy is enclosed for your information.

We acknowledge the need for national priorities and the role that local authorities should play in achieving these. We would commend to you the recent proposal of the LGA¹, that central and local government agree some thirty national outcomes that local councils take responsibility to deliver with their partners in the LAA.

We agree with your view that the scale and complexity of national targets and inspection can ‘crowd out’ local action to meet local needs and priorities. We welcome the move towards more citizen-led inspection from 2008 and the general emphasis within your report on letting councils get on with the task of engaging with local citizens and ‘shaping the place’.

We agree with your contention that local authorities’ role in convening partners and tailoring local services needs to be more formally recognised. Our response to the Government’s consultation on the future of local strategic partnerships (February 2006) expands on this point and is enclosed for your information.

We firmly believe that working in partnership is critical to achieving local outcomes, ensuring the totality of local resources are directed towards improving local quality of life. However, we also believe that there is a risk that transparency and public accountability may be lost unless clear frameworks within partnerships are established and communicated clearly to local residents. I would refer you again to our response to the LSP consultation, which expands further on the issue of accountability.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to participate in your Inquiry. If you have any questions or would like further information on any of the issues raised in this letter, please contact me.

Yours sincerely,



Penny James

Chief Executive

¹ Closer to people and places – a new vision for local government, LGA, May 2006.