

Lyons Inquiry into Local Government Submission from Wycombe District Council

INTRODUCTION

Wycombe District Council has been in existence since 1974, operating within a three-tier local government system in Buckinghamshire. We are one of the largest district councils in England in population terms, with over 162,000 residents.

The Council has considered your Interim Report on the future role and function of local government and offer the following points for consideration as your Final Report is prepared.

GREATER DEVOLUTION TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Council supports the need for greater devolution to local government in order to undertake the two main roles identified. However, we do not believe that developing the contractual approach, building on the Local Area Agreement framework, is the way forward.

The LAA model is neither 'local' nor an 'agreement'. In Buckinghamshire we have, collectively, signed the LAA in March this year and are already in the position of seeing additional national targets being imposed and a significant increase in the extent of nationally-pooled budgets, rising from £1m at the start of the Agreement to nearer £10m in 2007/08. Such a focus leaves very little capacity in the agencies to develop a local role as outlined in your interim report.

There are other mechanisms that can, and should, be explored for example, building on the duty to co-operate, outlined between partners outlined in the recent consultation document on local strategic partnerships. One practical way of ensuring local discussion and early involvement between partners is for Government to simply require that a number of agencies, or perhaps the local strategic partnerships, have to formally endorse the submission of strategies and funding plans. This would then ensure local joining-up at an early stage and have a debate on local priorities, rather than be working within a central Government imposed framework.

Wycombe would like to reinforce this process by stronger engagement with non-domestic ratepayers. The best way that this can occur will be through the return of this source of funding to local control. We have already demonstrated our willingness to work in partnership with non-domestic ratepayers through the redevelopment of the town centre in Wycombe, where innovative asset management and financial leverage is beginning to yield long term benefits.

We believe the best way of enhancing these key relationships and developing them further is to create a framework through local business rates that will necessitate dynamic interaction of parties. Forward looking businesses

understand the need for investment and will support sound business cases for regeneration and development. Their involvement will also provide an additional stimulus to the Council to continue to improve its services and enhance value for money.

PROVIDING LOCAL CHOICE AND PLACE-SHAPING

We support the concept of local authorities as having a 'first amongst equals' role in the locality, given our local democratic mandate. Whilst the thrust of your report to devolve more power from central to local government is welcomed, there is an argument to look at this issue as a reform of the public sector, rather than just the central –local government relationship.

No reference is made to the diversity of local government (Unitary, County, District and Parish) and this is an important dimension in how the two main roles are taken forward in the locality. Our experience is that a locally-based council working in and for readily identifiable communities is a strength that enables local choice and place-shaping to work at its best. The larger the area covered by a Council the more remote it becomes to people's lives unless additional local mechanisms are put in place, often at greater cost and with diluted functions.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND ENGAGEMENT

We have developed a sophisticated local 'grassroots' engagement mechanism since 2000, with elected Councillors at its heart. This has provided more visible community leadership at the Ward level and increased accountability to, and engagement, with local communities. This model we believe has created lasting benefits, being developed on the concept of self-help and community development. This creates an important 'place-shaping' role for locally elected Councillors and gives a meaningful role within the new Cabinet system, which inevitably places executive decision-making on far fewer Councillors than previously.

INCLUSION OF COUNCILLORS

Councillors are an integral part of the workings of Councils and thus we believe that where Council officers have the knowledge of working within Councils then there must be the same acknowledgement of the work that Councillors do both within the Council and within their wards/divisions. These are the people that have been chosen by their constituents to represent their community.

PARTNERSHIP WORKING

County/District/Parish Councils, Police and PCT's should all work in partnership to ensure that wherever there is a meeting of the public wherein they report any problem(s) or concern(s) that is/are occurring in their community to these joint meetings that these concerns would be effectively

and promptly dealt with by whichever agency's remit it falls under. Partnership working would also make economies of scale which, in turn, would ensure value for money for the tax payer. It would be this partnership that understands the local needs and preferences and make sure that the right services are provided locally at the right cost.

With partnership working such as this it would also ensure that there would be no duplication. It is also vital that any remedial work these agencies may have to provide is not duplicated. It should also be a requirement that the service would be delivered by the appropriate local provider, which, in turn would enable the partnership to develop its own vital local role. This in turn would ensure that this would be building and shaping local identity.

BALANCE OF POWER BETWEEN LOCAL AND CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

A recurring strand running through the proposals is the need to re-align the balance of power between central and local government, in favour of local government. This would give Councils the space and ability to innovate in response to local circumstances whilst working to agreed national outcomes. The Planning Service is a good case in point where greater local flexibility would enable a more responsive service to be provided.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Council supports the two main roles outlined in the Interim Report. We believe they can best be implemented through Councils that are based on identifiable local communities, with a wider range of functions from across the public sector with space to deliver on local priorities through clear engagement with communities. The most effective way of doing this with a stable financial platform is through the return of non-domestic rates to local control, and the Council commends this approach to you.

(This submission was approved at the meeting of Wycombe District Council's Cabinet held on Monday 24 July 2006)

Contact details

Charles Meakings, Corporate Manager (Policy and Research)
charles_meakings@wycombe.gov.uk
01494 421980