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Wolverhampton Citizens' Jury Topline Findings: "Wolverhampton's community response to the Lyons Inquiry" (1 June 2006)

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Lyons Inquiry

The Lyons Inquiry was commissioned by central government in July 2004 to carry out an independent investigation to consider the case for changes to the present system of local government funding in England. The Inquiry's terms of reference were widened in December 2005 to include an investigation into the function and future role of local government from the perspective of key stakeholders.

On 15 December 2005, Sir Michael Lyons published an Interim Report and Consultation Document setting out his approach to the Inquiry's extended remit and preliminary thinking on his work to date. Sir Michael invited comments on the Interim Report, and submissions to the questions raised in the consultation from all key stakeholders.

1.2 Wolverhampton Council's Response

Wolverhampton City Council submitted a corporate response to the interim report of the Lyons Inquiry in March 2006. Further to this, Wolverhampton City Council decided, as part of a wider process of consultation involving a number of different methods, to convene a Citizens' Jury to hear the views and aspirations of local residents. The Citizens' Jury took place over two and half days from Wednesday 10th May to Friday 12th May 2006 at Molineux Football Stadium, home to Wolverhampton Wanderers. The Jury model was chosen because of its innovative nature as well as to enable a representative cross-section of Wolverhampton's communities to debate the issues within the remit of the Lyons Review. The Citizens' Jury is a first for Wolverhampton City Council. Wolverhampton is unique in being the only local authority to choose this method to provide supplementary evidence to the Inquiry.

2. OUR APPROACH

2.1 The Citizens' Jury and Jury questions

Opinion Leader Research was commissioned by Wolverhampton City Council to convene and manage the Citizens' Jury. The Jury model is ideally suited to enabling 'lay people' to deliberate and respond to complex policy questions. The Citizens' Jury agenda was designed

to give Jurors the opportunity to participate in discussions, work creatively with other Jurors, hear from and respond to internal and external expert witnesses, and consider issues from different perspectives.

The Jury considered two main questions in relation to the Lyons Inquiry. These were:

- i. What should the future role of local government be?
- ii. Who should be responsible for making decisions that affect Wolverhampton - central government, local government or local communities themselves?

During the Jury there was a combination of neutral briefing sessions and presentations from witnesses each with a specific 'point of view'. Witnesses with an interest and expertise in local government were chosen to share with jurors a range of perspectives on the current debates around the role of local government and the issue of devolution and decentralisation. The witnesses included people working in local government, the voluntary and community sector, academia, regional and national agencies.

2.2 Recruiting the Jury

Sixteen Jurors were recruited to take part in the Citizens' Jury, with members of the Jury broadly reflecting the make-up of the local Wolverhampton community. This included a mix in terms of:

- Gender
- Age
- Socio-economic background
- Ethnicity
- Disability
- Geographical location within the City
- Previous or ongoing involvement with Wolverhampton Council.

Jurors were recruited using canvassing in the city centre and different locations around Wolverhampton. In order to recruit a diverse cross-section of the community Jurors were not told of the topic of the Jury in the recruitment process. This was to ensure wide representation from the local community, rather than only attracting people with a particular interest in local government or people who were already active in the local community and local government.

3. JURY VERDICT

What follows is the Verdict as it was presented by the Jurors to the Verdict Panel in the final session after two and a half days of deliberation. The Verdict Panel was made up of eight representatives from Wolverhampton City Council, the Wolverhampton Partnership (LSP), Wolverhampton Primary Care Trust, and the Youth Council.

3.1 What should the future role of local government be?

In response to the first Jury question Jurors made the following recommendations.

3.1.1 Key Principles

The Jury identified a set of core principles to guide and inform the role of local Councils. These are to:

- look after people and the environment they live in

- be a strong governing body, where staff and councillors are appropriately trained, with the relevant experience and education to carry out their role to a high standard
- be an organisation which is responsive to public needs and which leads and develops local communities
- ensure the provision of cost effective, needs-led local services
- be able to accurately identify public need and act upon these needs to provide an appropriate level of service to local people.

The Jury discussed the idea of place-shaping as described by Sir Michael Lyons. They agreed that the term place-shaping had little meaning to local people and communities, and that a more relevant term should be used. Their suggestions included using the words “local” and “community”.

While the Jury did not agree with the use of the term place-shaping it supported many of the ideas behind it in relation to the role of local government. The Jurors agreed that local Councils needed to be pro-active in representing and lobbying on behalf of local people. Place-shaping was seen as a way of keeping local Councils and central government in touch with local people and their needs. It would mean that local Councils could develop very local solutions – at street and neighbourhood level – and move beyond a ‘one size fits all’ approach.

3.1.2 How should people be involved in local decision making?

The Jury considered what role, if any, local people should have in decision-making about issues which affected them and their communities. They concluded that:

- effective local decision-making requires, as a prerequisite, the regeneration of a strong local community spirit
- the community should be consulted on local issues which affect them
- local people need to be much more aware of how the Council works and the processes and mechanisms by which they can get involved in decision-making. Raising awareness of these mechanisms should be a priority for the Council
- residents need to be actively encouraged to participate in changes which will affect them, including exercising their vote in local elections
- establishing locally representative neighbourhood groups (at a street level) would be a good mechanism for engaging people in decision making.

3.1.3 The Council's role in working with other organisations

The Jury agreed that local Councils are not the only providers of services, nor the only stakeholders in developing and promoting the well-being of local communities. However, it is recognised and acknowledged that Councils are in a central and influential position where they can take the lead in promoting the needs of their local communities. Jurors considered the Council's relationship with other organisations, and which key groups should be involved in local government.

The Jury agreed there should be strong links between the Council, other providers of public services in the area, the business community and community groups of all descriptions. Bringing together the voluntary sector, faith groups and those involved in education, health, transport, emergency services and race relations, for example, was seen as an essential part of the Council's community leadership role.

The Jury's view was that the Council needed to have a strong leadership role, and that this role included advocating for and representing the people of Wolverhampton and their needs in

different forums and at different levels of government. The Council's role was to be *"the voice of the people"*.

3.1.4 Priorities for Wolverhampton City Council

The Jurors considered how the key principles (3.1.1) translated into a set of strategic priorities for Wolverhampton City Council. They identified the following five priorities for the Council:

- To create an attractive and safe place to live and work
- To create opportunities for businesses and individuals to thrive
- To be the representatives of the local community, understand local needs and make sure the right services are provided to people
- To tackle anti-social and disruptive behaviour
- To bring local communities together, making sure everyone's voice is heard.

3.2 **Who should be responsible for making decisions that affect Wolverhampton?**

The second question considered by the Jury was who should be responsible for making decisions that affect local people in Wolverhampton. The Jurors were asked to consider this in relation to four specific service areas – GP's and hospitals, housing, community safety, and improving the local environment. Subsequently, they were asked to comment on the roles of central government, local government and the local communities in influencing how these services should be delivered.

3.2.1 Which services and decisions should central government be responsible for?

The Jury agreed that central government should set the national agenda for:

- Health
- Education
- Law and order.

The Jury's view was that central government needed to ensure that minimum standards were set and met across the country, so that people received similarly high standards of service regardless of where they lived. The Jury also recognised that central government was experienced at service delivery across these three significant agendas. Jurors discussed the issue of regional or local differences in standards in these key areas. They were particularly concerned that any changes to governance arrangements should not allow a 'postcode lottery' in standards to develop. For example, Jurors were concerned that waiting times for operations should not differ whether they attended a hospital in Wolverhampton or Birmingham.

In education provision, Jurors felt that national government, regional government and the local community all had roles to play. As with health, however, it was their view that national government should guarantee that standards did not differ dramatically from one area to another, and that pupils across the nation were taught broadly the same material (national curriculum).

For law and order, the Jury felt that central government should be primarily responsible for ensuring that local councils had adequate funding for police services in their local area. Participants also felt that it was the task of central government to pass and enforce laws, to ensure that everyone adheres to the same rules and regulations throughout society.

3.2.2 Which services and decisions should Wolverhampton Council be responsible for? Why?

The Jury agreed that the Council should be responsible for:

- **Housing:** the Council's primary role was to ensure adequate provision of affordable housing in its local communities through planning and development, and that a high quality and uniform standard of housing was maintained across Wolverhampton. Local housing standards needed to meet central government criteria, and be developed in consultation with local people and communities.
- **Transport:** Jurors expressed dissatisfaction with the overall standard of public transport in the area, and specifically the bus services. They discussed but did not agree who should be the main provider of public transport services (local or regional authorities). Jurors agreed however that the local council should have a much greater role in ensuring that services met local needs.
- **Environment:** similarly the role of the Council was to ensure that local environmental services were delivered to a high and consistent standard across the community. These included street cleaning, bins, industrial pollution, parks, and environmental health.
- **Local needs:** Jurors agreed the Council has a role in ensuring the right services are provided for local people. This included consulting with people about their needs in a way that was targeted and encouraged people to have their say. Councils needed to take a 'common sense' approach and collaborate with other services to improve the customer/service user experience. The Council needed to be in a position to know and understand the needs and aspirations of local people.

The Jury agreed that for the above services, the Council was more in touch with the needs of the local community than central government. However the Council still had work to do in building a picture of local needs. It was the Jury's view that local government should have a more important role to play in ensuring health, education and police services operated according to the specific requirements of local communities. They also saw a role for local government in bringing services providers together to create a seamless service for residents (across, for example, health and social care provision).

3.2.3 Which services and decisions should the local community be responsible for? Why?

The Jury agreed that the local community should be responsible for:

- **Education:** schools were considered by the Jury to be a vital part of local communities and as such the local community should have a role in school personnel matters through the PTA and school governing body. The Jury wanted schools to play a greater role in the community and in building community spirit. The Jury suggested stronger links between schools and local businesses and other groups.
- **Housing:** local communities needed to take an active role in consultations and putting forward ideas on their housing needs and preferences. Local communities should have a direct say about what happens in their neighbourhoods and on their housing estates in terms of amenity and estate management.
- **Transport and roads:** Jurors saw a key role for local communities in ensuring that the design and maintenance of local roads met the needs of the residents who lived on them and who used them. They wanted greater involvement in decisions on traffic management and road safety systems (e.g. speed bumps). They also considered safety whilst using public transport a cause for concern and suggested local communities had a valuable role to play in telling the council which bus routes or bus stops gave residents cause to fear for their safety and how the council should approach tackling the problem.

- **Environment:** responsibility at the community level regarding the environment focused mainly on the need for people to get involved with regeneration projects to make neighbourhoods more attractive and safer places to live. This often linked into community safety, as many felt that some public areas, especially parks and green spaces, were currently not safe places that people could enjoy. Jurors also felt that it was the responsibility of citizens to be vigilant and report problems within their environment to the council e.g. broken glass, vandalism, dirty needles, litter.

Throughout their deliberations the Jury returned to the model of people being involved and having a role at a very local level – streets and neighbourhoods - about issues that affected them. The services and conclusions set out here are areas that the Jury felt were local to the community, and had an immediate and real impact on people's day to day lives.

4. JURY THEMES

In addition to the Verdict presented by the Jury to the Verdict Panel, the following themes were raised and discussed throughout the two and half days of deliberations. While many of these themes are integral to the Jury Verdict, they are presented here as separate and complementary findings.

4.1 Our Wolverhampton

Jurors placed a high value on their local community, and the importance of building community spirit and strength was raised throughout their deliberations. They saw a strong and active local community as the foundation for a healthy and prosperous community. It was acknowledged that *“get that right, and the rest works much better”*. The diversity of Wolverhampton's population was recognised as a distinguishing and positive feature. Participants were more likely to identify with their local neighbourhood as their “community”, rather than the wider area covered by the local Council. Jurors identified a strong need for capacity to be built in local communities in terms of responsibility and participation in decision making over services which affected them locally.

Participants consistently identified a number of recurring themes or service areas that were of concern to them. Crime, community safety and antisocial behaviour were a major concern for all. There was scepticism at the reducing crime statistics, with participants having the view that levels of crime and anti-social behaviour (including vandalism) were increasing even though the crime levels were reported to be decreasing. There was also concern about different aspects of the Council's Housing service.

4.2 Wolverhampton Council: roles and responsibilities

Overall Jurors thought that Wolverhampton Council was doing a reasonable job. However they were unclear about the scope of the Council's responsibilities and authority, and the funding the Council was responsible for. There was also limited understanding of the roles of Councillors. Participants were surprised to find that the Council has fewer powers than they thought – *“the Council has less clout than you imagine.”* Jurors felt that the Council should have a clear remit and a leadership role in advocating the needs of the people of Wolverhampton. The future role of the Council needed to include strategic interventions on behalf of communities within Wolverhampton, including representing the needs of local communities at local, regional and central government forums.

In discussing leadership, the role of Wolverhampton's Councillors was raised, both as a generic issue and with specific reference to Council performance and accountability. Jurors were not aware of the range of activities and duties that Councillors undertook, including the level of contact they had with constituents through door-knocks and surgeries. They were also not aware of Councillor's roles and responsibilities in making policy and financial decisions on behalf of Wolverhampton residents. There was a strong view that Councillors should have job descriptions to attract the best people for the job, in the same way that a well run business would seek the best person for the job. It was also acknowledged that Councillors were less likely to reflect the diversity of Wolverhampton's local communities, and that "*it's all white and retired – so it can be difficult to be involved*". On discussing whether Councillors should be paid a salary the Jurors view was that you need qualified people who can "*do the job properly*".

4.3 Streets and neighbourhoods: community involvement and the local Council

Jurors supported the idea of local communities influencing and being involved in decision-making, particularly for local services. However they also recognised that being involved can take time and commitment, and this was not always a priority for people with busy lives. Different Jurors were able to give examples of ways they had been involved or lobbied for change in relation a specific issue such as a park, anti-social neighbours or street paving. All of these worked at a very local neighbourhood level and brought people together to change and improve their local surroundings. The Jurors' view was that consultation with local people needed to focus on an end result or outcome, and it needed to be relevant and interesting.

Increasing the level of community involvement was considered to be a priority by the Jury. Involvement and consultation needed to be local (at the level of streets and neighbourhoods) and personal. Jurors proposed involvement and consultation on a street to street level, with local residents providing a network of links between the Council and those neighbourhoods.

4.4 Delivering services and accountability

Delivering services that best meet local needs and the issue of accountability were two themes identified by Jurors in their deliberations. Jurors agreed that there needed to be a better understanding of local needs, and the approach to service development and delivery needed to be tailored to move beyond a "one size fits all" approach. Jurors agreed that the local Council had a better understanding of local needs than central government, primarily because it is "closer" to local people. However, the Council needed to do a better job of understanding local needs and ensuring the right services were available. Central government was seen to have a clear role in setting national standards, it was the role of local government to tailor services to meet local needs and to lobby on behalf of the local community for the funding of local services.

4.5 Citizenship and local democracy

For many Jurors the experience of taking part in a Citizens' Jury raised questions about people's political education, citizenship, local democracy and the relationship of local communities with elected members and the Council. The Jurors agreed that political education in schools was essential in informing young people of the democratic processes and systems. There was concern from Jurors that local communities only interact with their Councillors every

four years, and that there was no ongoing dialogue between elections. The discussion included issues of trust and how to build trust between Councillors and local residents. Some Jurors questioned the political nature of local Councils, and the general perception was that Councillors and politicians were self-interested and not interested in representing the needs of their local community. Local people wanted their Council and Councillors to be more visible and more pro-active, so that residents could 'see' the evidence of actions and outcomes. The shift to a dialogue rather than one-way conversation between the Council and residents was considered to be a major step in building trust between communities and their elected representatives.

4.6 Value for money and Council Tax

Throughout the Jury's deliberations the issues of Council finances, Council Tax and the funding split between local and central government were raised. Jurors were surprised to learn that their Council Tax only made up between one-half and one-quarter of the total amount spent on public services in Wolverhampton. While the Jury did not explore the complexity of the finance system in detail, Jurors had views on the principles behind Council tax and Council spending. They agreed that the relationship between Council Tax and other tax, what it gets spent on and whether it is good value for money needs to be much more transparent. Participants had little knowledge of how local and other taxes were spent. Jurors thought that annual increases in Council Tax were inevitable. However they were not necessarily opposed to paying more Council Tax, so long as it was for an identified need, and they were able to see that the funding went directly towards meeting that need. The affordability of Council Tax was a concern for some Jurors, particularly pensioners.

5. THE JURY EXPERIENCE

For the sixteen Jurors who came together during the course of the two and half day Jury, the experience of the Jury was unique. At the end of the Jury all sixteen were asked to give feedback. Overall, they stated that they found the Jury to be a very positive experience, with most people feeling they had learnt a lot about their local Council. One of the key learnings for participants was a greater understanding of the workings of local government, and a better knowledge of the differences between central and local government powers and responsibilities.

At the end of the two and a half days, the majority of Jurors considered that this kind of consultation was a good way for the council to work together with the public over important issues, mainly as it provided an opportunity for the council, as well as participants, to hear the views of people they might not ordinarily hear.

'I have learnt that people of all walks of life should all work together for a better place to live.'

'I thought this was going to be some sort of simple research. I had no knowledge of how intense or important this event was going to be!'

6. NEXT STEPS

Opinion Leader Research will be submitting the final report to Wolverhampton City Council on 30 May 2006.