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Sir Michael Lyons
Lyons Inquiry
Room 3/12
1 Horse Guards Road
LONDON
SW1A 2HQ

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Dear Sir Michael

Promoting economic prosperity

In addition to sending you our detailed response to the questions posed in your December 2006 discussion paper (attached), I wanted to offer some personal observations as well.

First, I want to make the point that whilst your “place-shaping” phrase seems to have caught on widely as succinctly describing a key role for democratic local government, we should not forget the link between it and having the resources to do the job locally. Place-shaping is not just a benign ‘talking shop’ activity - it involves making some occasionally difficult local decisions which match priorities to funding decisions.

I emphasise this point because each in their own way, Eddington, Barker and Leitch are proposing anti-devolutionary *structural* solutions to what are not essentially structural problems. In particular, we must counsel caution against structural ‘solutions’ that draw decision-making (including financial) powers even further away from the people and communities they affect precisely because this runs counter to the whole spirit of devolution and “going local”. Many of us in local government hope you will continue to advocate the clear benefits of place-shaping having a local democratic face – and local government having the wherewithal to deliver local aspirations – rather than a remote, unaccountable regional (however configured) one.

Secondly, where the reviews do rightly identify significant weaknesses, I would suggest those weaknesses are essentially to do with *process*. To be blunt, it is often a case of “too many cooks”. Whatever the perceived benefits of pluralism, it undoubtedly has had the consequence of fragmenting and diffusing accountability for an increasing proportion of public expenditure on what are essentially local services and issues.

Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in the case of adult skills training for a competitive, buoyant workforce. Leitch essentially avoids the real dilemma of how the development and then delivery of 14-19 strategy has been incrementally and unhelpfully carved up into different components with differing age-bands and instead recommends the creation of yet more new delivery bodies to add to the partnership soup.

It is paradoxical that critics of two-tier local government make much of the claimed public confusion about who does what, yet it is left to local government in the main to point out that this is really quite straightforward compared to the complex array of powers, remits, memberships, accountabilities and budgets of regional and subnational quangos, with cross-cutting and overlapping objectives.

I believe local government has more than amply demonstrated its abilities in partnership working and perhaps we should now be listened to as the experts when we call for a moratorium on Whitehall departments promoting the case for new ones. Or perhaps we should adopt the principle that any new quasi-statutory partnership cannot be created unless it involves amalgamating at least two existing ones?

I hope these comments and our submission will aid you in developing your advice to the Chancellor.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alex King', with a horizontal line underneath it.

Alex King