

STAFFORDSHIRE MOORLANDS DISTRICT COUNCIL

Response to the Lyons Inquiry – Promoting Economic Prosperity: Considering the Implications of Eddington, Barker and Leitch

Introduction

Staffordshire Moorlands District Council welcomes the opportunity offered by the Lyons Inquiry to comment on both the work already done by the Inquiry in looking at local government function and the concept of 'place shaping' and also welcomes the chance to comment on the Eddington Study of transport issues, the Barker Review of Land Use Planning and the Leitch Review of Skills.

The Council is working, as you would expect, on its more detailed response to all of these initiatives and further details can be obtained, should the Inquiry require them, from mark.bailey@staffsmoorlands.gov.uk.

The Council's response was discussed at a meeting of the Cabinet on 9th January 2007, and also by the Lyons Inquiry Working Group (made up of six Members of the Authority's Services Overview and Scrutiny Panel) at a meeting on 17th January. In addition, all Members of the Council have been given the opportunity to comment on the Inquiry's questions and areas of interest. Due to the short timescale permitted for this work, however, it has not been possible for the Council to undertake the widespread engagement it might have wished – for example, with members of the general public.

The Council therefore asks that, in terms of future engagement processes, the Lyons Inquiry provides for a longer period in which to gather views for local authorities – although SMDC does understand and appreciate the pressures the Inquiry is working under. In addition, the Council is keen to see the Inquiry's final report, as this will have a major impact on the future direction taken by local government generally and SMDC in particular.

Key Messages

- The Council is unclear what is meant by 'local authorities' in terms of the questions put – the situation is often different for a District Council than it is, say, for a County or Unitary Authority (or even a parish or town council) and questions asking about local the powers of local authorities need to take this into account. Need to get back to what local government stands for and what its role should be.
- The reality for local authorities is that powers are limited by the constant problem of interference and the restraints placed on the funding of local government generally. In this area, part of the problem is created by Advantage West Midlands, who hamper SMDC's ability to deliver in both the economic development and tourism sectors, especially in rural areas.

- This contrasts with other regions, where RDAs like EMDA ensure delivery in these areas because they are responsive to local need, unlike AWM.
- It is difficult to detect any extra powers that local authorities should have – SMDC is generally able to do most things under the Power of Well-Being under the 2000 Local Government Act. It is rare these days that a local authority like SMDC cannot do something, but SMDC is limited by the resources available to us.
 - The bottom line of all this should be the standard of services SMDC provides to the public – the Inquiry should be considering all services and service areas, not just a select few.
 - The difficulty in the County/District system is that you share power and therefore it can be hard to get some things done – the County Council controls the majority of the available resources and so they can call the shots from time to time.
 - Local authorities can work in partnership and do so with considerable success in a number of areas of work. When working with the private sector, however, it is not so easy, as business does not do what public authorities say, unless there is a profit in it for them.
 - SMDC has to work in partnership on a range of things, but there is no guarantee that a city region would make things better for Staffordshire Moorlands as an area, but SMDC may need a seat at the table to make its voice heard.
 - The problem for district councils is the role of the County Council, and this has always been the case – they are so remote geographically from SMDC and cannot always see beyond Stafford in terms of their deliberations.
 - Local authorities should not be based on county boundaries – they should be based on districts, and the power base should be in the Staffordshire Moorlands, not in the city of Stoke-on-Trent or at a Staffordshire level.
 - SMDC is located in an area of outstanding beauty and this can only be protected if local authorities have the ability to protect it.

Eddington Transport Study

The Council's response is set out below: -

- Public transport in the Staffordshire Moorlands would not pay for itself, especially in rural areas, which contrasts with places like London.
- The private sector often causes issues in terms of transport in this area, as their motive primarily is one of profit, rather than the provision of services – the profit motive always wants to seek out the 'easiest' option. For example, if a bus service is set up in Biddulph, it is always about getting people out of the town and into Stoke on Trent. As an authority, SMDC is looking to get routes in place to take people around the towns and the district as a whole – the agendas are not the same. Creating a

viable transport system is not necessarily economically practical for bus companies.

- SMDC does not receive subsidies from the County Council for transport of any significant amount, and it is not clear that SMDC works closely with the County Council on this. Essentially, the County has left public transport provision to Stoke on Trent, so the district needs partnership working to be effective in the sub-region to sort transport issues out. It requires something like a passenger transport executive to tackle the issues of under-provision of public transport in the Staffordshire Moorlands.
- The view is that Staffordshire Moorlands does not necessarily need a city region to deliver transport changes. What SMDC and the district needs are resources. The trouble with Staffordshire CC is that they don't have the money, and they have different priorities from us. There is no ambition in Staffordshire displayed towards getting better public transport in place. North Staffordshire has been passed over as an area to Stoke and they have said that Stoke should lead on dealing with transport matters in the area. Stoke, in turn, does not want to bother with the Staffordshire Moorlands.
- Again, the 'local authority' aspect of this needs to be clarified – which local authorities are we talking about here? SMDC would like to see a transport system designed for the benefit of people in the Staffordshire Moorlands. Staffordshire CC and Stoke on Trent CC direct resources to other areas which they view as being in greater need. A prime example of the transport problem in the area is that there are only 2 buses that carry people from Leek to Biddulph and back again. SMDC needs to be in control of the transport issues for the area.
- A major problem for this area is that it is in the shadow of Stoke on Trent, and funding for North Staffordshire generally goes to the city and not anywhere else in the sub-region. It has been the same since 1974, when the current system was established.
- Road pricing schemes are merely another tax on motorists, who have already paid their taxes via road tax and through the purchase of their vehicles.

Barker Review of Land Use Planning

- Quality of life issues have been assured in areas like the Staffordshire Moorlands by the stringent enforcement of the green belt policy since the last war. That the Review should even contemplate tampering with these boundaries is horrifying and will play into the hands of greedy developers. Once the green belt is no longer sacrosanct then the flood gates to uncontrolled development will ensure that the present distinction between urban and rural areas will disappear to the detriment of all.
- It is vitally important that the local control and accountability in terms of the planning function is maintained. If this were ever to be regionalized, then

- democratic accountability would disappear and decisions that really matter to local people would potentially be taken from them. Again, the only winners seem to be those who care only for the development at any cost and who care naught for our environment.
- In terms of issues over planning, big strategic issues that may impact on neighbouring areas will potentially affect Staffordshire Moorlands and so it is not clear cut about the role of a Commission. For rural areas like Staffordshire Moorlands, there are issue to consider such as de-population that need to be taken account of.
 - It is a good thing to keep central government out of local planning matters, but central government has sufficient power to override local planning policies should it so wish.
 - It appears that local government spends virtually all its time implementing central government policies and virtually no time undertaking its own initiatives for the benefit of the local area and developing local solutions to deal with issues.
 - Speeding up the appeals process is fine, but the underlying threat is that a new body will be created, and that cannot be right, as the local authority will be excluded. A body set up nationally to deal with green belt changes will have little or no regard to local concerns, and things could be destroyed by decisions taken from afar.
 - Fiscal incentives always sound good, but they are really a stick with which to beat local authorities – i.e. you will not get the money unless you tow the line. Again, this appears to be undermining the role of local authorities.
 - Issues such as the proposal to tax vacant land sites is a good idea.
 - What is the definition of a ‘major project’? Not happy about proposals to move decision making away from local people – we should take the decisions.
 - Something needs to be done to deal with the planning system in this country, but proposals to alter the green belt do not seem like the right way to go.

Leitch Review of Skills

- Skills will only be developed where there are jobs and certain skills are required – would like to see apprenticeships brought back.
- Skills of the district is crucial in terms of economic development and it is in all our interests to see skills improving.
- Any arrangements in this area should be at the local level, and not on a regional or county basis.
- The decision to only allow people living in the city to have the EMA has created some resentment amongst residents in this area.