



## **Report to Cabinet**

**Subject: “Local Vision” – The Governments 10 - Year Vision for Local Government**

**Date: 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2005**

**Author: Scrutiny Officer**

### **1. Purpose of the Report**

To inform Cabinet that Members from all three Scrutiny Committees- Services, Community and Quality of Life and Resources and Management have reviewed the Local Vision paper and their respective comments have been summarised in the attached report.

### **2. Background**

This paper was first presented at Cabinet on the 4<sup>th</sup> August 2005 for the Members attention. It was then referred to the Scrutiny Chairs group in September for further consideration when the contents of the paper were outlined by the Head of Cabinet Office.

### **3. Proposal**

That Members consider the attached scrutiny report.

### **4. Recommendations**

That Members determine any submissions to be made to the ODPM on these papers.



## **Report to Cabinet**

**Subject: “Local Vision” – The Governments 10 - Year Vision for Local Government**

**Date: 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2005**

**Author/s: The Scrutiny Chairs- Councillors A. Gillam, C. Preston and G. Clarke**

### **1. Purpose of the Report**

To reflect the views offered up by Members on the Services, Community and Quality of Life and Resources and Management Scrutiny Committees.

### **2. Background**

This report has been presented to all Members on Scrutiny Committees and whilst their comments do not address all aspects of the Local Vision Paper, where there has perceived to be some information warranting comment, in addition to the discussions and views expressed at the scrutiny committees individual Members have made comments. These have all been assimilated into the response below.

### **3. Findings**

#### local:vision - Vibrant Local Leadership

It was felt by a Member that the Government’s vision for local leadership was theoretical and/or pious. Furthermore, this Member considered that the local leadership chapters reflected unfounded assumptions i.e. that in saying that something is so, doesn’t make it so.

#### Chapter 1: Local Leadership: what is it and why does it matter?

It was considered by one Member that the document misses the key point within its scope, that is, the poor quality of many councillors. They noted that there is almost nothing that councils can do to improve that quality and it was considered that there was little that government can do directly. The Member sought to question why the standard has been allowed to fall so far noting that any reasons for this also go unaddressed in the paper. They appreciated that that whilst so few people wish to become councillors, the question of the councillor's profile is usually of little significance. The Member felt this issue is compounded by the standards boards system which has added to the poor reputation of councils and made the recruitment of good candidates even more difficult. It was also felt by the Member that the Cabinet system has made the gaining of experience by the next generation of leaders more difficult and created leadership problems for the future. He/she also felt that (the current system for) elected mayors can make this problem even worse.

## Chapter 2: The leadership roles of councils and councillors

A Member felt that the assertion that councils should be the leaders of their localities is problematic when as the paper suggests such a leadership role should be undertaken in association with partners. This he/she feels 'dilutes' this leadership role as any council would be dependent upon agreements with others and finance from others, thereby making it difficult for them to make decisions and exhibit leadership. This Member felt that this would cause people to realise that their council is relatively powerless and therefore constrained in being able to enable and empower people (the opposite of what the preceding chapter in the paper suggests should happen).

Another Member also notes that the funding of LSP's in relation to partnering Councils in their leadership role has not been addressed within this document.

The first Member believes that the document is flawed in so far as the writer is more focussed upon unitary/metropolitan/London Borough councils. He/she observes that most of the country has two tier councils and queries which of these would be the leader of the locality as proposed in the paper?

The same Member disagrees with the assertion that the advocacy role of councillors is undervalued. He/she notes that councillors *are* already advocates for their wards and their councils, and observes that he/she does not know of any councillor that does not feel this is their duty. He/she disputes the related idea that councillors should be recognised and developed in respect of becoming 'local leaders'. From a more pragmatic standpoint the Member recognises that being a councillor is only one of several aspects of people's lives and many do not wish this to dominate. Therefore he/she notes that the concept of 'local leadership' needs to be clearly defined, but if this is going to involve a significant change from the status quo, then many experienced councillors may opt to drop out, thereby exacerbating the current recruitment position.

### Chapter 3: Local political leadership of the locality as a whole

It was observed by one Member that it could take years for scrutiny to develop. He/she noted that it is often highly dependent upon the quality of the members taking part and their preparedness to put in additional time. The Member noted that councillors who have 'grown up' under the old system are not used to having to volunteer for additional meetings or to having to find additional diary dates. He cited the example of small councils (i.e. most districts) who cannot afford the resources necessary to make the system work well. The Member also believes that a 'more formal requirement for executives to act on scrutiny findings' has the potential for serious problems because if the calibre of councillors is weak this can result in poor scrutiny decisions.

### Chapter 4: Political leadership of local communities and neighbourhoods

In respect of delegated budgets one Member reports that Gedling Borough Council is seriously short of money. 97.5% of the revenue budget is spoken for before the beginning of the financial year and the capital position is even worse (this year we are having to make use of prudential borrowing in order to complete our capital programme). He/she reports that Gedling already has very small-delegated budgets to members (£1,000 per member per year). The Member observes that an increased delegated budget to members would be at the expense of the council's priorities, which have been set and backed up with finance according to the government's guidance.

Many Members expressed deep concern around the mini-mayor, single member concept. It was felt that strong leadership associated with this role could potentially attract the wrong sort of people. For example one Member felt that representatives from British National Party would be attracted to the single membership mini-mayor role. Other reservations cited by Members in respect of the mini-mayor role included the concern that the mini-mayor might only involve his/herself in problems associated with their ward to the detriment of the wider borough area. Similarly, Members felt that if a mini-mayor were ill the ward would be deprived of representation. Members also identified potential problems during holiday and by-election periods.

Members agreed that the sheer responsibility implied by the role could deter many groups from considering standing for council and these may well be from under represented groups i.e. younger working people with families, women and minorities that the paper hopes to attract. Similarly, it was also acknowledged that the work involved with the role could put a lot of pressure on a single member particularly those representing an area with a high deprivation index or in an area comprised of highly educated middle class people forming pressure groups. Members also queried that if every Member on the council was a single Member mini mayor where would the portfolio-holding members of the Cabinet come from?

One Member observed that Members work with their parishes/town councils; all the time and that they are often members of both (because of the shortage of volunteers). Because of this dual role he/she queried as in the case of the single member wards – would the ‘mini-mayor’ be the district councillor or the county councillor? (Similarly, this Member feels that the document does not properly consider two tier areas.) The Member also notes that district councils find it difficult to afford back up resources for members.

One Member notes that in respect of single member wards the government has just allowed the Boundary Commission to establish many two and three member county seats in place of single Member seats. He cites that single member wards in Leeds would have 6,000 electors whereas in small rural councils it could be less than 1,000. This Member presents a scenario that if a current three member ward is due to be split up, which Member is going to volunteer to take the third which produces all the casework because it has a deprived estate? He/she suggests that this will be a real problem and will cause some good councillors to ‘burn out’ whereas in a three-member ward, the work can be shared. This Member speculates that more wards means more boundaries which could result in more confusion for the public who (in his/her experience) do not like to phone Members only to be told that they live on the wrong side of the street and need to contact someone else. He/she believes that in multiple member wards the public have a better chance of finding someone of their party, their sex, their religion or who agrees with them about the issue they want to raise. The Member notes that in a single member ward, if a person was in conflict with a ‘mini-mayor’, where else could they go for assistance or redress?

In respect of boundaries this same Member observes that more boundaries mean more safe seats and this in turn could mean more elections decided by the Boundary Commission. He/she highlights that safe seats could potentially mean more poor councillors. This Member suggests that the Government should first decide a voting system as that could indicate what boundary system to go for. He/she believes that under the current voting system, multiple member wards are probably best in urban areas and large villages. The Member acknowledges that single members should represent low population areas to minimise travelling and, hopefully, increase local knowledge.

Other Members agreed that multiple member wards are still a good idea citing the following reasons. Multiple member wards can be a reassuring way for ‘first timers’ to experience politics and build up knowledge. If one Member is sick others can provide continuity of representation. Multiple Member wards enable a member to combine extra responsibility such as being a portfolio holder or cabinet member with being a ward member. It provides safety in numbers in difficult situations. Members believe that residents have a choice of person to contact. It enables the voter to mix and not just vote on party lines.

One Member felt that as ward members are (spread thinly) on various Council committees i.e. planning this could be in contention/conflict with any ward issues if there are too few councillors to represent people.

Another Member felt that the concepts within the document relating to governance at a local level presented other questions. He/she reasoned that if governance at a local level should be open to change then how do MP's in parliament change to reflect this? He/she considered that the changes suggested in the document should apply across the board not just at this (our) local level of the democratic process.

#### Chapter 5: The future supply and development of local political leaders

Members considered there were certain practical barriers which impacted on the future 'supply' aspect of political leaders before they could even consider their subsequent 'development'. These included the remuneration aspect i.e. who would fund people to take time out from work? It was felt that the current councillor payment of circa £3,000 is not conducive to younger people wanting to become members i.e. most people in council are approx 65 yrs of age. It was noted that local authorities are supposed to fund councillors and it was suggested the government should fund local authorities properly so to reimburse people taking 'time out' and to attract younger (often working) candidates. However, it was also recognised that whilst making it easier for would-be councillors to take time out from their careers, this would probably only enable recruitment to large councils rather than district councils. Members felt this is because district councils usually have evening meetings (thereby not usually necessitating paid time off work) and workloads are lighter. Similarly, it was noted that increased remuneration is not possible for most districts and isn't necessary. Members agreed that remuneration is a key point within this chapter and is not adequately addressed. Finally it was considered that the rest of the chapter including the 'development' of local political leaders is theoretical and not in keeping with reality.

#### Chapter 6: The challenge for future local managerial leadership

A Member felt that this chapter did not address or take account of the fact that there is a significant shortage of qualified professionals in all areas of local government. This shortage is particularly acute in the higher managerial roles and it is particularly felt in district councils which cannot offer high salaries.

#### Chapter 7: Vibrant local leadership – the future

A member felt that there needs to be a uniform structure for local government but after that, the key to successful local government is diversity. It was observed that local government exists, in part, because every area is different and local authorities need to develop local solutions to local problems. He/she felt that the

resulting diversity is vital to successful local government and it should therefore be encouraged. The Member considered that there is no 'right political and managerial leadership role' and that the roles will vary according to the persons involved and local tradition and needs. The same Member considered it restrictive for the Government to consider trying to force a particular model on everyone as he/she felt that this will not work and will have adverse effects. It was observed that elected mayors are alien to our political traditions and that; they involve a major change in our style of democracy from a corporate, inclusive democracy to an individual, elitist democracy. This Member cited examples reported from the USA and France which demonstrate that, sooner or later, elected mayors are associated with corruption.

### local:vision - Citizen engagement & Public Services: Why neighbourhoods matter-

#### Chapter 1: Improving public services – why neighbourhoods matter

One Member felt that there should have been more clarity or a working definition applied to what the document describes as a 'neighbourhood'. This is exemplified by the Member giving an example whereby in his/her ward, there are approximately 2,000 households, and within this are 3 neighbourhoods plus some other properties. He/she considers that only one of the neighbourhoods can be defined with precision and that he/she believes there may be some doubt about that. The Member queried whether the paper means much larger (geographical) areas? He/she comments that as the paper repeatedly refers to 'neighbourhood arrangements' and he/she presumes they don't mean elected bodies.

#### Chapter 3: When and how people in neighbourhoods can act

A Member observed that there are a lot of people around today who do not like politics and see councillors as part of the political system. He/she considered that neighbourhood forums are a way of reaching these people and enabling them to become involved in local decision-making. The Member noted that as there is some uncertainty about future government structures, neighbourhood forums can be good medium for engaging the community.

#### Chapter 4: Resources and capacity for neighbourhood arrangements.

A Member expressed reservations about a proposed system that would use unelected individuals to determine how public money is spent. He/she considered that such a person could become distrusted and unpopular as they would not be accountable and therefore (vulnerable and) open to accusations of corruption. The Member noted that there seemed to be no differentiation within the document between large councils and the smaller districts. He/she observed

that the districts are unlikely to have the money to be able to allocate a budget to neighbourhoods and without money neighbourhoods would have little use.

#### **4. Additional Member Observations/Recommendations**

One Member considered that this document shows a lack of understanding of the diversity of local government. He/she felt that there is little to show that the writer(s) understand the issues and problems that Local government is currently struggling with or even knows of the existence of the two-tier system.

Another Member noted that the idea of 'selective education' (recently mooted by the Government) is at odds with the paper's idea to build stronger communities.

It has been noted by various Members this document is not a real consultation exercise. It was felt to elicit more meaningful responses the document would need to pose questions, wait for the responses and then propose solutions based on those responses. Members felt that the preferred options should not have been suggested in the paper without first asking questions and considering answers. Overall Members felt that this document represented tokenistic form of consultation.

One Member felt that the Government should concentrate on:

- 1: the financing of local government.
- 2: the structure of Local government – too many councils are too small to be effective, particularly on the government's new agenda which is perceived to be rather ill-defined and cumbersome, the public does not understand the structure in two tier areas and a feeling that two tier councils are currently moving apart despite commitments to (joined up government?) because of the need to pursue better scores in the CPA system.
- 3: the voting system.
- 4: how to improve the quality of people standing for election standing for election.

#### **5. Recommendations**

That this report is passed on to the ODPM