



Report to Cabinet

Subject Communities in Control – Local Government White Paper

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1. Purpose of the Report

This report provides an overview of the recent Local Government White Paper “Communities in Control; real people, real power”. Given the large number and wide range of proposals, it is recommended that the Policy Review Scrutiny Committee be invited to assess the implications for Gedling and to report back to Cabinet with recommendations.

2. Background

In July 2008, the Government published the “Communities in Control; real people, real power” White Paper. The White Paper sets out an agenda for reform that aims to give local people more power and influence over the things that affect them.

The Government argues that there is a clear case for reform, pointing to low turnouts at elections, a decline in membership of political parties and an increasing gap between local Councils and the public that they represent.

Two key principles underpin the proposals set out in the White Paper. Firstly, that local people want to be involved and have their say in the running of local services, but often find this difficult. Secondly, that citizen engagement is a good thing in itself, helping to build community spirit, develop local skills and improve the overall well-being of an area.

The White Paper is organised into eight different chapters, each of which contains a series of proposals. At this stage, many of the proposals are short on detail and will need to be followed up with specific guidance and, in some cases, with legislative change. Set out below is a very brief chapter summary to give Cabinet a flavour of what is included.

3. White Paper key proposals

The “Duty to Promote Democracy”

- A new “duty to promote democracy” is to be introduced to encourage councils to promote involvement, for example, through use of improved publications and websites and raising the profile of ward councillors
- The Duty to Involve (introduced in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007) will be extended to bodies including the Arts Council, JobCentre Plus and Regional Development Agencies
- Councils will be encouraged to promote and increase voter turnout through campaigning and recognition schemes.

Active citizens

The paper seeks to support citizens in taking an active role in their communities with measures to remove barriers to voluntary work, including:

- £2m to assist disabled people taking up voluntary roles
- Establishment of a £70m Community Builders Fund to support community-based organisations
- Creation of an £80m Grassroots fund to provide grants to small voluntary and community groups
- A commitment to work with faith communities with a view to removing the barriers to commissioning services from faith-based groups.

Access to Information

- Neighbourhood Policing Teams are to be held to account through a new “Policing Pledge”
- Councils are encouraged to make information available at a neighbourhood level (not just at the local authority level)
- Councils should ensure that information is provided in formats and places that are readily accessible and easily understood
- Government will work with the Local Government Association to identify ways to support councils in making information that they hold more readily available.

Having an Influence

- There will be a new duty on councils to respond to petitions
- 5% of residents signing a petition will require a debate in full council
- Councils will be required to respond to petitions on subjects outside of their direct sphere of influence, for example, for petitions relating to PCTs
- Government intends to roll out participatory budgeting across all local authorities by 2012
- Councils are to be given the power to provide incentives for voting in local government elections
- A right of appeal to the Secretary of State is to be introduced where a community’s proposal for a local council is denied by the local authority

- A programme is to be set up for young people to 'shadow' government ministers.

Challenge

- Public sector officers to become more publicly visible
- Chairs and Chief Executives to face a regular public hearing
- The powers of Overview and Scrutiny are to be enhanced to allow them to require information from partners on a broader range of issues
- A new right to require, by petition, that senior officers in local public services should attend a public hearing.
- A consultation will be opened into on-line petitioning for establishing an elected mayor, and also to look at lowering the percentage of residents required to trigger a referendum on having an elected mayor from 5% to 2,3 or 4%.

Redress

This chapter deals with providing quick and fair redress when things go wrong and making sure that the same mistakes are not repeated. Proposals include:

- Review of the Local Ombudsman's jurisdiction
- Expansion of community contracts between the council, police, NHS and the community detailing obligations on service delivery
- Undertaking a review into extending redress for citizens when their council services fail to meet agreed targets.

Standing for office

The White Paper builds on some of the recommendations from the Councillors Commission and continues the theme of ensuring that Councillors as a whole are more representative of their community.

- Relaxation of the "Widdicombe rules" which prevent officers from standing for political office, for all except the most senior officers
- Positive promotion of councillors through changes to the publicity code
- Encouragement to delegate localised budgets for councillors
- Support for modernising the way that councils do business by legislating for councillors to participate and vote in meetings remotely.

Ownership and Control

- A new Asset Transfers Unit will be set up to disseminate best practice and offer advice on the transfer of assets to community groups and the third sector
- A new Social Enterprise Unit is in the process of being established to champion that sector

4. Resource Implications

As already stated, many of the White Paper proposals are thin on detail at this stage. At the point when we assess whether to take forward the proposals, consideration will be given to the resource requirements.

5. Recommendations

Cabinet is recommended to invite the Policy Review Scrutiny Committee to assess the implications of the White Paper and to report back to Cabinet with recommendations.