

Warwickshire and West Midlands Association of Local Councils

(Affiliated to the National Association of Local Councils)



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OPEN PUBLIC SERVICES WHITE PAPER

FEEDBACK FROM DISCUSSION EVENT HELD ON 16 AUGUST 2011

This consultation is the most explicit demonstration yet of the Government's intention to expand the capacity of the local council sector. The key part of the White Paper for local councils is Chapter 4, which focuses on neighbourhood services. The White Paper promises new powers for local councils, including in the areas of streetscapes, parking, leisure facilities, bye-laws and licensing. Local councils will also gain additional powers through community budgets which will pool funding streams to tackle specific local concerns. The Paper states that the Government wants to make it easier for principal local authorities to devolve public services to local councils and similar (accountable) grassroots bodies. This may be followed by a national framework to facilitate the easier devolution of services to local councils.

Chapter Four is about neighbourhood services. Its main points are:

- To reinvigorate parish councils, enabling local people to take control, to act collectively and have a direct say in running services and assets
- To enable parish/neighbourhood councils to work more effectively with principal authorities
- With more power there will be more enthusiasm for being a neighbourhood councillor and new councils will be created where they don't yet exist
- To create a national framework of delegation to make decentralisation easier
- To generate options for building the capacity and delivery capability of P/N councils

The proposals are to be driven from the bottom up by the "motivation and capability of councils in different neighbourhoods".

The complete White Paper maybe accessed at
www.openpublicservices.cabinetoffice.gov.uk

The aim of the event was to generate discussion on the Government's localism policy and to assist councils in their response to the White Paper and in particular to section 4 Neighbourhood Services. It was facilitated by Elisabeth Skinner, University of Gloucestershire, lecturer in Community Governance.

In order to help shape the National Association of Local Council's submission Chris Borg would welcome a copy of your council's response by Noon on Wednesday 7 September to chris.borg@nalc.gov.uk .

37 representatives attended from 24 different councils with electorate ranging from 237 to 5000. The following questions were discussed: (These are based on the questions in the consultation paper at para 4.12)

- 1. What scope is there for Parish/Neighbourhood (P/N) councils to take greater control of local services?**
- 2. What help would P/N councils need for this agenda?**
- 3. How can Government improve delegation and financial frameworks for P/N councils?**
- 4. How can Government ensure accountability to eliminate the disadvantage of those not directly involved?**

Summary of Comments:

1 What scope is there for P/N councils to take greater control of local services?

It was acknowledged that councils already have many statutory powers and that others suggested in the White paper would be welcome. However there was considerable concern that all councils would be constrained by the capability of the council and the community while councils serving small populations would particularly lack expertise, finance and capacity. They would be unable to deliver the same standard of service as principal authorities and cannot take advantage of economies of scale without clustering or more effective co-operation between tiers of local government.

2 What help would P/N councils need for this agenda?

It was noted that the present system is sound but the following points would help it to work more effectively.

Direct finance from Government to expand the capacity of P/N councils including a share of business rates;

Support for training;

Greater incentives for clerks to undertake training. The award of one increase on salary scale is at discretion of the council but should be automatic.

Free access to legal and planning expertise and services;

More training in management of relationships between groups and individuals;

More resources for the support bodies for councils (County Associations of Local Councils)

Greater co-operation between all tiers and a compulsion on principal authorities to devolve finance with services and assets.

Provision of fast efficient broadband in all areas.

Incentives and support for greater collaboration between parishes (clustering) including models of how to work together to deliver services with model agreements to enable sharing of finance, resources, legal responsibilities etc

Instil a sense of community pride and ownership on all residents by providing incentives for volunteering – greater recognition in work place - allow time off work (some financial recompense?) and by educating the public in community spirit (the Big Society) at schools, colleges, pubs, health centres etc. Do not assume people are automatically going to give time to the community.

3 How can Government improve delegation and financial frameworks for P/N councils?

Solve problem of double taxation once and for all. Some way towards achieving this would be the reinstating of section 136 payments and make them compulsory for principal authorities to pass on to neighbourhood councils, previously it was at their discretion.

Ensure part of the community infrastructure levy is handed to parishes to invest in the very local community. For example in the past play areas and play equipment have been financed by section 106 payments.

Delegation of planning and licensing powers would raise profile of the council, but still scope limited by capacity.

Introduce Government regulations with regard to delegation and have national models for good practice readily available. Should not be left up to principal authorities to act as they think fit.

Have model contract documents readily available

Redundancies in public sector is a loss of expertise, should be made available to neighbourhood councils

Increase the status of the clerk – using the French model of local government.

4 How can Government ensure accountability to eliminate the disadvantage of those not directly involved?

All neighbourhood councils should be fully constituted parish and town councils, which are already subject to regulations and financial controls. The alternative is single interest groups including NIMBY groups taking on services for their own ends and creating huge inconsistencies and inequalities between communities – the cause of recent disturbances in inner city areas?

5. What would make it easier to create new neighbourhood councils?

There was insufficient time to allow discussion of this question

CLOSING REMARKS – ELISABETH SKINNER

Parish councils need to consider where they wish to be in 10 years time rather than feeling the constraints of where they are now. There is concern that if councils do not step up to the mark there is a danger they will be side-lined. There are real opportunities available through the power of general competence which is included in the Localism Bill . She explained the proposed eligibility criteria for exercising this

power. It was accepted that some councils will make use of opportunities and some will not.

The Association is grateful to Elisabeth for facilitating the event. The Association also thanks all representatives for their attendance and hope it was of assistance in preparing their response to the Government's consultation. WALC will be utilising the comments to inform its response.

Alison Hodge County Secretary August 2011