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bulletin

Thoughts on the Empowerment White Paper: the CLES perspective

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Introduction

The Empowerment White paper published on 9th July 'Communities in Control: Real People Real Power'¹ sets out the Government's plans on 'passing more and more power to more and more people using every practical means possible'. CLES eagerly anticipated the white paper and welcomed the high profile focus upon community empowerment and the recognition at the central government level of the need to devolve power. Whilst the paper provides some good ideas there are a number of inherent tensions. The purpose of this bulletin is therefore to discuss the white paper and these tensions in more detail framed within the core legislative proposals of the Empowerment White Paper.

About the Empowerment White Paper

The Empowerment White Paper opens with a statement of its aim '*Communities in control aims to pass power into the hands of local communities. We want to generate vibrant local democracy in every part of the country and to give real control over local decisions and services to a wider pool of active citizens*'. This core vision is shaped by 'seven key questions' which the white paper attempts to address from the perspective of local citizens:

- **Being active in your community** – how can I be an active citizen and volunteer?
- **Access to information** – how can I find out information in a way I understand and can use?
- **Having an influence** – how do I have my say and influence the decisions being made on my behalf, both by elected and appointed people?
- **Challenge** – how do I hold to account the people who exercise power in my locality;

¹ Communities and Local Government (2008) *Communities in control: real people, real power*. London: HMSO

- **Redress** – how do I get swift and fair redress when things go wrong and make sure it doesn't happen to someone else?
- **Standing for office** – how do I stand for office and what support should I get?
- **Ownership and control** – how can my friends, neighbours and I own and run local services ourselves?

These underlying issues shape the seven chapters of the Empowerment White Paper, the key proposals of which are summarised in Appendix 1. At the outset, it is important to recognise some of the key proposals of the Empowerment White Paper. These key proposals include:

- **A new duty to promote democracy on local authorities** which is to complement the duty to involve. The duty to promote democracy is an effort to build on the work being done already at a local government level to promote democratic understanding and participation with suggestions for reform including clearer information for citizens, better trained staff and more visible councillors in the community.
- **Extension of the 'duty to involve' to additional agencies and bodies** across England including Regional Development Agencies, Job Centre Plus, Homes and Communities Agency, Probation Trust and Youth Offending Teams.

Whilst the third sector are not included as a sector to engage in the duty to involve the paper does propose the establishment of a Empowerment Fund of £7.5million to support national level third sector organisations turn key empowerment proposals into action. This is however the first hint of the paradox that runs throughout the paper between devolution and the scale of the proposals and actions.

The White Paper also proposes a number of new funding streams and units to support empowerment activity, targeted on supporting community anchor organisations and encouraging community organisations to take greater ownership and control of local services/assets with a strong focus on social enterprise. These are:

- **The £70million "Community-Builders" Fund** to enable community anchor organisations to make a "step change" in their activities. 'community anchors' to help them offer local community facilities, deliver local services, and be run as *"economically viable social enterprises"*.
- **The £7.5million Empowerment Fund** to provide support for existing national third sector organisations operating across England. The fund will focus on national organisations *"helping local communities turn key proposals into practical action on the ground in areas such as community leadership, involvement in planning and social enterprise."* A consultation is being launched alongside the White Paper, with a commitment to launch the fund in late 2008.
- **A new Asset Transfer Unit (ATU)** to build on the work of the Advancing Assets for Communities Programme which was led by the Development Trust Association, which will extend demonstration projects around community asset transfer and lead a campaign with local authorities and community groups to increase the number of transfers.
- **A new Social enterprise Unit** to champion the role of social enterprise models in areas such as housing, health and regeneration.

There are number of other proposals in the White Paper which are described in Appendix 1.

The Historical Context and the Drivers of the Empowerment White Paper

The Empowerment White Paper sits within the New Labour and the Government's objective of tackling social exclusion and reducing disadvantage through community involvement, engagement and empowerment. Over the last 11 years policy generally, as well as specific initiatives have had the concept of community involvement and participation at their heart. This has been particularly focused upon the most deprived areas through the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal² and the New Deal for Communities programme and more generally through Community Empowerment Networks and other local forms of participative community initiative.

This move towards empowerment of community is also set within the context of devolution to local government and local areas through two Local Government Acts. The Local Government Act (2000) legislated for the formulation of Local Strategic Partnerships with the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act (2007) upping the ante of these strategic partnerships through reform of Local Area Agreements and other policy designed to enhance local decision making and power. This commitment to partnership is also outlined in the Sustainable Communities Act (2007).

The Empowerment White Paper acknowledges that reform is required as a result of three core drivers. Firstly, the United Kingdom is in a state of decline when it comes to democratic governance and decision making. There has been a significant decrease in voter turnout at local and general elections, together with a growing mistrust and apathy towards political decision making. Secondly, this democratic deficit is set within a climate of growing policy challenges with regard to: economic instability; environmental uncertainty; social inequality; and the breakdown of place and place identity.

Indeed the two agendas of democratic deficit and social inequality are intrinsically linked with evidence suggesting a correlation between social class and the decision of the individual whether to vote or not. In the 2005 general election the lowest turnouts were in inner-city seats in Liverpool, Salford, Manchester and Glasgow, some of the most deprived and socially excluded communities in the country.

Thirdly, the issue of devolution of power continues to be prevalent, particularly in England. The United Kingdom remains extremely centralised as acknowledged in the white paper and whilst powers for local government and local politicians in the form of elected councillors have increased in recent years there remain tensions in central-local relations.

In the eyes of CLES, community empowerment is also intrinsically linked to the health of local economies, which is why understanding local economies and local communities is an important aspect of the Sub-National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration and particularly proposals for local authorities to undertake Economic Assessment Duties.

² Social Exclusion Unit (2001) *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal*. London: HMSO

CLES Comment

It is therefore clearly a time where strong political leadership accompanied with empowered local authorities and communities is required. CLES were thus eagerly anticipating the Empowerment White Paper. We were particularly keen to see the return of local community empowerment to the political agenda with strong links to the Local Government Bill and the renewed local economic development agenda as outline in the Sub National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration. However, having digested the proposals of the Empowerment White Paper, it is clear that whilst there are some positive proposals and good ideas, there are others which do not entirely link together and which do not link to other current agendas and indeed legislation. CLES have a number of core concerns with regard to the content and focus of the white paper which we will explore in the following section of the bulletin.

The process

One of the main weaknesses of the White Paper is that its legislative purpose is relatively unclear. The emphasis seems to be more on a scattergun approach, where Communities and Local Government have presented a collection of their best ideas and aspirations for further discussion and development with other departments and strategic partners. It is however difficult to see why legislation for many proposals included in the White Paper are needed.

The principles of democracy

The principles of democracy are somewhat lost in the White Paper despite a number of proposals being linked to increasing representative democracy. The principles of empowerment outlined in chapter 1 do not really relate to core themes of democracy of social justice and social responsibility. Indeed, the Empowerment White Paper actually appears to narrow democracy opposed to broadening it, with its support for directly elected mayors. The White Paper is about greater citizen engagement in policy and local decision making but directly elected mayors could contradict this vision as handing decision making powers to one person can in effect create something which is narrower and shallow. A broad and resilient democracy should never just be about the vision or aspiration of one man or one woman.

A number of contradictions and tensions

The white paper presents a tantalising overview of the state of democratic system in the UK today along with some interesting ideas. However, unfortunately, it hints at, but fails to address some of the tensions or questions that underpin this debate. It also tries to do too much perhaps by attempting to knit together a bundle of difficult agendas into one cogent strategy. These difficult agendas include:

- **Balance between representative and participatory democracy** – the white paper assumes by strengthening the mechanics of participatory democracy, that they will see an equivalent reinforcement of representative democracy which is broader and deeper. However, this relationship is by no means a given and the paper itself contradicts this assumption through some of the proposals, particularly elected mayors as described above. It is also in danger of trivialising representative democracy through some of the proposals for incentivising electoral turnout including prize draws and “I’ve voted” badges. These proposals are ill thought through and not the way of increasing participation in the democratic process. Government need to recognise that democracy and electoral turnout is far more intertwined to service delivery and social exclusion and not simply a case of turning up to get a prize.

- **The right to be oppositional** – civil society should retain the right to be oppositional, and in this the white paper does consider both individual and collective activity. However it fails to truly recognise the existing role that community groups, organisations and campaigns already play, in campaigning for local and broader issues around social justice and equity. For example, it makes an implicit assumption which equates the development of community anchor organisations with social enterprise. This limits and potentially neutralises their role. Community anchors play many roles within their communities providing a strong voice to speak up for the needs of local communities and to campaign for social justice and equality. Among other things, they mobilise collective action and contribute to a sense of community identity and as such play a much wider role within the empowerment agenda besides service delivery and asset management.
- **Passing power to whom and who?** - The debate around central-local control continues to rage and at the start of the white paper Communities and Local Government seem keen to address accusations of over centralisation through its desire to “pass power” directly to citizens. The issue here is about how much power is being passed and why. The process of passing power must be weighed up in terms of good democracy, efficiency and effective service delivery. For example, one must be careful in ensuring that passing power to local authorities does not undermine the community by limiting the influence of the electorate, service users or community providers etc. Likewise passing power to the community should not undermine local authorities by weakening service delivery, economies of scale etc. It is our view that the broader rationale and strategy for any passing of power is fundamentally weak in the white paper. The principles in the white paper are not founded on good democracy or excellent services or even efficiency but rather a broad set of competing ambitions and aspirations. In short it is somewhat devoid of real vision and direction as to how democratic power should operate in England and the relationship at different scales and different types of power.

Detachment from other departments

The paper also fails to provide enough glue to secure cross-departmental consensus for what action should be taken to strengthen empowerment. It does provide a useful summary of the progress made in other departments to address the empowerment agenda, including the new systems of accountability within the NHS, the emerging “Policing Pledge” and work within Defra and DWP. However, it fails to indicate what contribution departmental delivery against the proposals set out in the empowerment white paper, will make against PSA targets and wider public sector reform. Subsequently, empowerment could be interpreted as a minority interest confined to the interests of Communities and Local Government.

This failing is further reinforced by the fact that individual departments themselves have been bringing out their own blueprints for empowerment including the UK Department for International Development’s report on Champions of Participation Engaging citizens in Local Governance which is strong on the need for cross departmental ‘linking and learning’. Similarly, the Ministry of Justice have just published a discussion Paper on the subject of a National Framework for Greater Citizen Engagement, advocating the use of citizens’ summits, citizens juries and petitions.

The link between democratic deficit and social class

One of the more intriguing elements of the white paper is in terms of its analysis of why there is poor voter turnout. Early in the paper, it highlights how individuals social class and economic position is an important factor in deciding

whether people vote or not. This issue is however never returned to. In subsequent pages, we are offered lots of new processes and remedies to tackle poor turnout, but its impact is fettered as it offers nothing on these deeper socio-economic causes of poor turnout. The danger is that the voter turnout problem will continue unless these underlying causes are addressed.

Academic understanding

The Empowerment White Paper is framed within Arnstein's ladder of participation, written in the late 1960s. Whilst this in the past has been a useful tool of measuring the extent of civic participation and engagement, its thinking is outdated with regard to 21st century political decision making, local governance and the role of the citizen in democracy. It also points to a lack of understanding on central government's part as to the sophisticated nature of community involvement, participation, engagement and empowerment. As a basic principle which believes in citizen control, Arnstein's ladder may be a useful starting point. However, without a deeper and subtler theoretical basis and understanding to empowerment, the worry will be that many good ideas contained within the white paper may actually make things worse.

Tone and layout

The tone, layout and voice of the white paper is at times patronising and is poorly linked to other contemporary policy such as the local government bill. The use of quotes at the start of each chapter from Aristotle and Douglas Adams, for example are a little contrived and do not really link to what community empowerment should be really be about which is ensuring sustainable local economies and places and promoting social justice.

Conclusion

The Empowerment White Paper has to date been critiqued by a range of policy makers and commentators. CLES would argue that whilst there are some good points and proposals within the paper the general myriad of proposals restricts the potential impact of the policy in devolving power to local government and local communities. There are a number of issues which we feel the white paper could have considered and detailed more prosaically to ensure more effective local empowerment. These would include:

- The role of social justice and social responsibility as a principle of empowerment;
- Stronger support for community groups across the variety and diversity of the third sector;
- Grant funding for third sector organisations that need it to support infrastructure;
- Recognition of the advocacy in addition to service delivery role of third sector organisations;
- A recognition of the direct linkages between voter apathy and poverty, deprivation and the perception of the quality of public services;
- Clarity over participative and representative democracy and a recognition that the white paper needs to find an appropriate balance;
- Where the limits to "passing the power" between the centre, local government and the community are and why these are limits;
- A recognition of the value of cross-departmental approaches to empowerment, particularly in the climate of Public Service Agreements and the renewed emphasis on local economic development.

A White Paper which provides a strong focus on empowerment and advocates the principle of shifting power to communities and citizens is welcome as is the

acknowledgement within the document that there are fundamental issues that undermine the health of our civil society in the UK such as continued deprivation, voter apathy, centralisation and a lack of interest in civic roles within our communities. The White Paper provides a potpourri of potential solutions to tackle some of these fundamental issues but requires a much stronger focus and greater cross departmental support in order to realise a true shifting of power to local communities. Furthermore, the assumed benefit of the “passing of power” may be worthy and correct, however without a deeper theoretical basis to the passing of power, the worry is that the white paper will not be robust enough to withstand parliament.

Appendix 1 - Summary of the Proposals of the Empowerment White Paper

The proposals of the Empowerment White Paper are organised in seven chapters. This section of the bulletin summarises these core legislative proposals

Chapter 2 - Support in becoming a more active citizen or volunteer

Chapter 2 lays out government plans to build upon the tradition in the UK of volunteering and community activism. Key proposed actions include:

- £2million to support people with disabilities to volunteer;
- A Take Part programme for adults providing training on becoming an active citizen;
- The £70million 'Community Builders Fund' to enable community anchor organisations to become more sustainable and the further development of the Grassroot Grants Programme currently being developed by the Office of the Third Sector;
- A removal of barriers to commissioning services from faith-based groups;
- Further support for communities in developing local events such as litter picks.

Chapter 3 - Access to information

Chapter 3 sets out the Government's ambition to provide more accessible, open and informative information about policy and services to citizens, particularly with regard to their local council. Key proposed actions include:

- Ensuring all sections of the community can enjoy the benefits of the internet, and other methods of information;
- Increase access to information available at a local level and explore new and innovative approaches to sharing information both with citizens and with third parties.

Chapter 4 - Having an influence

Chapter 4 sets out proposals for greater citizen role and involvement in local, regional and national decision making. Key proposed actions include:

- A new duty for local authorities to respond to petitions. Local authorities will also act as community advocates for petitions related to the Primary Care Trust;
- Participatory budgeting, a model of community involvement in local spending decisions will be encouraged to be used by every local authority in some form by 2012;
- Local authorities should do more to promote voting in elections. The paper also proposes providing modest incentives for voting in local elections including entry into a prize draw;
- A proposal to encourage more neighbourhood councils;
- Engagement of more people in commissioning local goods and services;
- Support the use of 'community justice' giving local people the chance to decide, for example, what tasks offenders on work orders should undertake;
- More funding to support community engagement in planning;
- The formulation of a national level Tenant Services Authority, responsible for protecting all social housing tenants;
- The undertaking of a review of older people's engagement with government;
- Extension of the young advisors programme to establish direct access for young people to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and set up a programme for young people to 'shadow'

government ministers and elected mayors.

Chapter 5 - Challenging those in power

Chapter 5 sets out proposals for citizens to hold local and central government to account over their decision making. Key proposed actions include:

- Raising the visibility of the scrutiny function of the local authority, including encouraging councils to consider new approaches to scrutiny;
- Making public officials such as local authority chief executive more approachable and visible;
- Increasing the accountability of local policy and health services;
- Legislating for more directly elected mayors;
- The new Comprehensive Area Assessment to include an evaluation of the quality of public engagement;

Chapter 6 - Redress when things go wrong

Chapter 6 sets out proposals to enable citizens to seek redress and change when public policy or public service delivery in their area goes wrong or is ineffective. Key proposed actions include:

- Government are reviewing the Local Ombudsman's jurisdiction to ensure advice on how to complain about public services is included;
- Extension of Community Contracts which agree priorities between councils, police or the NHS with local residents, who in turn agree to play their part in meeting those priorities;
- Commissioning of a review into extending redress for citizens;

Chapter 7 - Standing for office

Chapter 7 sets out plans to make it easier for citizens to get involved in local politics and particularly stand as a local councillor. Key proposed actions include:

- Proposals for a wider range of people standing for local election including support for more black and minority ethnic women to become councillors;
- Amendment of the Widdicombe rules which forbid council workers above a certain salary band from becoming active in party politics;
- Giving backbench councillors more powers to make changes in their ward with discretionary localised budgets that they can target on ward priorities;
- Providing time off work for councillors who sit on other public boards such as court boards or boards of housing associations. This will include advice for employers through an employer's information pack.

Chapter 8 - Ownership and control

Chapter 8 sets out proposals that seek to increase the number of people helping to run or own local services and assets and transfer more of these assets into community ownership. This chapter picks up on the recommendations of the Quirk Review and key proposed actions include:

- The formation of a new Asset Transfer Unit to provide information, research and good practice on the transfer of assets to community ownership;
- Consultation on a national framework for Community Land Trusts;
- A new Social Enterprise Unit within the Department for Communities and Local Government to recognise the social enterprise contribution to the Department's objectives.
- Encouragement of local authorities to ensure social enterprises are able to compete fairly for public service contracts.

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