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Rapid Research 8 - Linking Elected  
Members and the Local Community more  
effectively through the Local Government  
White Paper

**CLES RAPID RESEARCH**



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## **Introduction**

After months of anticipation, speculation and departmental changes, the Local Government White Paper was finally released at the end of October. With speculation indicating that the paper could focus on devolved powers for city regions, concepts of double devolution and stronger central–local relations, the final paper is not as radical and devolutionary as was potentially expected. The Local Government White Paper does however have a number of significant proposals for changing the way in which local government operates in governance terms, in enhancing local partnerships, and in improving relationships between local people, local councillors and local and central state.

There are two interesting and core themes that shape a number of the proposals identified in the Local Government White Paper. Firstly, a strong emphasis is placed on the role of local councillors and elected members in local decision-making and delivery and in fostering links between local communities and local authorities. Secondly, emphasis is placed on the relationships and everyday interactions community groups have with not only their local communities, but also with local decision makers and local councillors. It will be interesting to see how these emphases of the Local Government White Paper can potentially strike the balance between participative and representative democracy.

The purpose of this rapid research is therefore threefold:

- It aims to provide an overview of some of the core proposals identified in the Local Government White Paper relating to local councillors and local community groups;
- It aims to assess the perspectives of local councillors towards the proposals of the Local Government White Paper generally and for their potential enhanced role;
- It aims to assess the perspectives of community groups with regard to the Local Government White Paper and the differences it would potentially make to their everyday engagement;

The research will conclude by assessing any emerging thoughts and gaps in the Local Government White Paper for central and local government as it moves from proposal to legislation.

## **Methodology**

This research has involved a desk-based analysis of the Local Government White Paper and telephone interviews with local councillors from different political backgrounds and telephone interviews with voluntary and community sector umbrella organisations and neighbourhood level community groups.

## **Background**

The gap between local communities and local decision makers and local democracy appears to be widening. There is a democratic deficit in some places with local people often failing to identify with local politics, often declining to add their voice to the debate on local service delivery, and often failing to influence local decisions and local strategy. Despite a concerted effort through the policies and programmes of the current government, some locally elected officials and local decision makers find the relationship between local government and the communities and citizens it serves strenuous and difficult, particularly with regard to engagement and proving the value of the local authority.

Whilst the Local Government White Paper contains proposals to improve local government performance, for local government to work more effectively in partnership, and for local government to provide more efficient and effective services, it also seeks to implement measures to reduce this democratic deficit. Firstly, it aims to give local leaders and local councillors more powers in order to engage more effectively with communities and citizens and so that barriers to strong, visible leadership and effective local democracy are removed. Secondly, it aims to give local people and local communities more influence and power to engage with local government and improve service delivery and subsequently their lives.



## **General Thoughts of Councillors and Community Groups**

There were a variety of thoughts on the Local Government White Paper from the councillors we spoke to. Whilst many felt that the paper was a step in the right direction in terms of governance, partnership and neighbourhood and community involvement, it was generally felt that the paper was not devolutionary enough in terms of powers and responsibilities. In many councillors eyes it simply did not go far enough. One councillor argued that despite their authority showcasing strong partnership, strong trust, and strong local authority-community relations to central government, this particular councillor stated that *'central government continue to be frightened to death to devolve powers to local people and local representatives'*. There are a number of themes and issues where councillors believe a more localised and councillor driven approach to change has already been developed and delivered, most notably around anti-social behaviour and liveability issues.

This failure to devolve significant powers to local authorities, local councillors and local people was taken further by another councillor who felt that the tone and commitment of central government to local government and localities was nowhere near enough and therefore represented a real missed opportunity. They stated that the White Paper was a *'rehash of tired and failed policies'* and that proposals to provide strengthened roles for councillors were not backed with new or enhanced resources or powers. They used the example of neighbourhood policing to highlight where extra councillor powers and resources could be more effective. Whilst currently Council Committees are able to hold meetings with the police, they don't have the powers or resources to deliver better neighbourhood policing where there is real evidence of need.

As the Local Government White Paper was recently published, its contents and implications have not yet necessarily filtered down to individual community groups. Awareness among community group leaders was therefore generally low except where they also had a role in a larger umbrella

body. Research was therefore mainly conducted among bodies responsible for co-ordinating and promoting community development and community organisations at a local, regional or national level. Such organisations are currently digesting the White Paper's recommendations and implications and disseminating information to community groups.

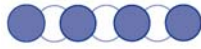
Reaction to the overall thrust of the White Paper was that the proposals were welcome in theory but that there were concerns as to how effective they would actually be in practice. A large umbrella group welcomed the fact that community empowerment is at the heart of the document. Reaction to the White Paper's proposals revealed the highly variable nature of relationships between individual councillors and community organisations and in the capacity of those organisations locally. A common concern was a lack of clarity over where resources were coming from to build the skills and capacity of community groups to take on the strengthened role proposed in the White Paper.

## **New Proposals and Mechanisms**

The Local Government White Paper introduces a number of proposals for stronger, more visible local leaders and councillors. This section seeks to introduce the proposals and assess the thoughts of councillors and community groups towards those proposals. The best councils according to existing performance measures such as the Comprehensive Performance Assessment and the Best Value regime as well as through local quality of life surveys are those, which work closely with local communities and citizens, and those which allow citizens and communities to shape the services they use. The Local Government White Paper identifies a number of proposals to strengthen the role of councillors in performance and the relationship they have with local people:

### ***Community Call for Action***

The paper proposes stronger actions for councillors to solve problems for the residents of their neighbourhoods through the Community Call for Action (CCfA). This new mechanism is designed to be the key link between local people, community



groups and public service providers and is designed to ensure vulnerable people and those least able to speak out are able to do so. Local people and groups will be able to take issues of local concern to their councillor to be taken forward to the relevant committee or officer.

Councillors had contrasting thoughts on the new Community Call for Action. On the one hand, it was felt it was a much-needed new tool for councillors to engage with local communities, to be more customer focused and ultimately more responsive to local needs. It was also felt it was a better opportunity than existing mechanisms such as councillor surgeries to take issues of real local importance, need and want to the Local Strategic Partnership and other council committees.

On the other hand however, it was felt that rather than bringing vulnerable and hard to reach groups closer to councillors and local decision making it would actually alienate them with a fear that the process would become dominated by a vociferous minority of community activists rather than the wider community. Questions were also asked about the nature of the issues being taken forward as part of the Community Call for Action. Councillors were concerned that some of the issues faced by local communities were not specifically issues that they or the local authority could directly influence but were rather the responsibility of other public sector agencies or the private sector. There was also concern over issues that were trivial and potentially more time-consuming.

Many community group respondents failed to see the difference between the Community Call for Action and the surgeries councillors currently run and other mechanisms that are used already. It is not clear what it will mean or how it will be triggered. One interviewee said: *'People have to be organised in some way to trigger it and councillors need to listen to the wider community and not just those who shout the loudest.'* It was pointed out that the White Paper did not acknowledge the need to invest the time and resources in building capacity and awareness to help a wider part of the community to take advantage of such mechanisms. One respondent said that while community groups might use the Community Call for Action, the

general public would not. One community group representative from the Midlands was adamant that the Community Call for Action would not work. He said: *'Councillors do what they want and spend money on what they want regardless of what the community wants. Our voices are not heard.'*

### ***Providing Service Delivery Information***

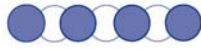
The paper proposes a string of measures to ensure that local people and local communities are made more aware of the performance of their local authority and the quality of the services which they receive on an individual and group basis. The paper proposes new roles for councillors in providing information to community groups and citizens. In particular the paper proposes that councillors:

- ❑ Develop innovative new ways to communicate with citizens such as producing report cards on particular local concerns such as crime and teenage pregnancy;
- ❑ Ensure the link between local authorities, Local Strategic Partnerships and local communities by providing information on progress against Sustainable Community Strategies and Local Area Agreements;

Councillors agreed that in theory utilising councillors to provide information on targets, services and performance was a good proposal. In some cases this is already happening as a result of strongly engaged councillors. It was recognised that in general local communities are often unaware of what the council are striving towards, how they are delivering on services and how neighbourhoods are improving. It was felt this is a mechanism that could enhance local knowledge and linkages between local people, councillors and the community. One councillor however recognised that there was a need for skills and capacity building for councillors to respond to this proposal and that resources may well be needed.

### ***Small Budgets for Councillors***

As part of the Community Call for Action process and where there is clear evidence that a more localised approach is required, the White Paper proposes that councillors are provided with a small budget to spend on projects in their local



communities. This could be particularly effective in identifying particular local issues early and taking action before they become major problems. Local authorities will be expected to consider the powers and budgets it considers appropriate to devolve to their councillors.

Whilst providing small budgets to councillors to tackle very local issues was seen by councillors as part of the way to devolved powers for localities and neighbourhoods, it was met with a degree of trepidation. There were particular concerns over how the budgets would be administered and reported upon. Citing examples from across the country where budgets have already in some cases been devolved to councillors for certain issues, one councillor was concerned that potentially the mechanism could lead to fraud, mis-spend and potential for parochial battles.

#### *Enhancing the role of councillors in overview and scrutiny and planning and licensing*

The Paper recognises that there is evidence of improving accountability since overview and scrutiny arrangements were introduced in the Local Government Act of 2000. However, recent research has indicated that overview and scrutiny arrangements can also fail to engage councillors and particularly non-executive councillors as the representatives of their area. The White Paper proposes legislation to strengthen the role of overview and scrutiny panels, particularly enhancing the ability of councillors to champion the interests of local people across a wide range of local issues. Local authorities will also be encouraged to set up 'area' overview and scrutiny panels, which again will enhance the influence of local councillors. The Paper also proposes removing the barriers faced by councillors in speaking up for their constituents or on issues of a very localised nature on certain committees. Particular new freedoms mean councillors sitting on a planning or licensing committee will have more opportunities to represent their constituents on planning or licensing issues that affect their wards.

Councillors generally stated that they would value a strengthened role in overview and scrutiny committees. Whilst stating that overview and scrutiny committees are increasingly improving as

a result of more effective engagement of councillors there remain concerns. This is most notable in situations where councillors need to find a way of becoming a positive friend within scrutiny, which requires in many cases time and trust. One councillor called for independent advisers to be employed on overview and scrutiny panels to ensure effective engagement between councillors and officers. With regard to planning and licensing decisions, one of the councillors we spoke to whilst in favour of this decision-making was mindful of potential vexations including NIMBYism and NOTE (not over there either).

#### *Enhancing the role of councillors in community cohesion strategy*

Councillors have a key role in supporting vulnerable groups and diverse needs. Strong local leadership and accountability is seen as one of eight guiding principles of effective community cohesion identified in the White Paper. It proposes new roles for councillors in partnership activity and overview and scrutiny on issues relating to community cohesion.

The councillors that we spoke to felt that the large emphasis placed in the Local Government White Paper on community cohesion issues was a knee-jerk reaction. They felt that in many local authorities and neighbourhoods the role of councillors in community cohesion issues had been going on quietly for many years and it has been largely effective in bringing issues to the fore. They on the whole felt it was not really necessary to legislate for such engagement and that the guiding principles identified in the White Paper were extremely general and things they were doing anyway.

The Local Government White Paper also proposed a number of measures to enhance the relationships between local people, local community groups, councillors and the local authority. Community groups were asked to comment specifically on the proposal for Local Charters. Other key proposals are also described below.

#### *Local Charters for neighbourhoods*

Dialogue between the community, the local authority and its service providers are crucial to



improving local services and neighbourhood engagement. The White Paper seeks to enhance this dialogue through the roll out of local charters. These have been piloted by some local authorities and set out the service standards and priorities for action, which local people expect, from the local authority, and sometimes a wider group of partners, as well as any obligations that the community has taken on itself. Charters will be developed through a parish council, resident's association, or other neighbourhood bodies and will generally cover, for example, the information the community can expect to get about the decisions, policies and services that affect them.

Local Charters were considered by one community group leader to be a good thing if they increase information about what was going on locally. But most respondents pointed out that Community Plans and Area Forums and Voluntary and Community Sector pacts already exist and it has not been made clear as yet how Charters will differ from these other devices. One respondent said: *'It needs to be something more exciting than is being offered to get people involved. It sounds worthy, but what does it actually do?'* A common view was that success of Local Charters will depend on how they are implemented locally and this has not yet been demonstrated. *'If the wider community is drawn in, it has potential, but it will depend on the process of how people work together to produce it.'* Communities are already involved in strategies, but in general local people, *'just don't take an interest,'* said one community group representative. A community group chair pointed out that Local Charters should be around shaping community relations as well as services and shouldn't be too service-orientated.

#### ***Reduced Bureaucracy and Stronger Parish Councils***

Leading on from the roll out of local charters, parish councils are seen as effective forms of local governance to draw together the dialogue between local authorities, service providers and local communities. In order to accommodate local charters and also to enhance local decision making and local identity the White Paper proposes building on the existing parish structure and making legislation simpler on setting up parish councils. In particular, it seeks to devolve the power

for setting up parish councils away from central government to district and unitary authorities.

#### ***Support for community groups to play a bigger role***

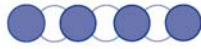
In order for community groups to take advantage of new opportunities arising in the White Paper and generally, their capacity and skills will need to be enhanced. The Paper proposes developing a support network for community groups which will deliver better support for community capacity building; greater awareness of how to make a difference; increased skills and confidence to engage; and more joined up advice on taking on governance responsibilities. The White Paper also allays a number of fears that have been beginning to emerge in the community sector over the move from 'grants' to 'contracts'. It proposes a minimum term of three years for any grant devolved to a third sector organisation.

#### ***Simplifying Community Consultation***

The ways in which communities and community groups are consulted on public policy is confusing and contradictory. Whilst local authorities are required to consult on developing the Sustainable Community Strategy, they are not required to produce a formal statement as to how local people have been involved. In contrast, Local Area Agreement guidance states that a statement of community involvement must be produced as part of the process. The Local Government White Paper therefore proposes that local authorities with partners draw up a more comprehensive engagement strategy in order to secure coordinated consultation and engagement.

#### **The Role and Leadership of Councillors**

The councillors that we spoke to for the research agreed and welcomed the fact that the Local Government White Paper had a strong focus on leadership and the role of councillors at the local level. One councillor particularly welcomed strengthened duties for the engagement of councillors, local community groups and local people in Local Strategic Partnerships, Local Area Agreements and Local Development Frameworks. Councillors have the ability, local knowledge and now potentially as a result of the Community Call



for Action greater opportunity to bring local issues and people together and play a stronger role in the thematic groups of the Local Strategic Partnership. This particular councillor believed in a local authority by which local people identify with a number of local and neighbourhood leaders, including councillors and take an approach to decision making of *'nobody is as smart as all of us'*. In order to achieve better local decision making and improved local services, there is a need for local and central government to recognise that local authorities and their partners cannot do everything themselves but need the support and skills of locally elected officials and ultimately local people.

Despite, the enhanced strategic involvement and engagement of councillors in local decision making identified above, it was felt that the Local Government White Paper would have gone much further in leadership terms if more decision making and delivery opportunities had been devolved to councillors and neighbourhoods. Councillors with the ability to, for example take responsibility for the development, consultation, funding and delivery of a new public park in their neighbourhood would be more recognisable in leadership terms, potentially benefiting local community and local democratic interests.

The White Paper's recognition of the need for greater diversity among councillors was viewed positively by community groups. When asked about the White Paper's proposals to give councillors a stronger community role and enhance their links with local communities, the extent of variations in councillors' status and relationships locally became apparent. The nature of the relationship depends very much on the individual councillor and some are highly involved in community groups and others are not involved at all.

A number of respondents pointed out that the leadership role for councillors identified in the White Paper is not new and is already happening in many areas. One community and voluntary sector organisation manager based in London commented that the White Paper emphasises the councillor's role as *'champion of the community'* when this is what they should already be. The White Paper's

proposals will help make this more consistent nationally, however.

When asked whether communities identify with the role of the councillor, respondents answered that this largely depended on individual councillors. A leading community development organisation representative welcomed proposals for councillors to have a stronger community role as, in her opinion, they had been feeling threatened by the rising prominence of the community sector. One interviewee argued that the executive style of governance has meant a concentration of power in the hands of a few members and less of a role for backbenchers.

A strong message was that individual councillors' skills and capacity vary greatly. One community group representative said most local councillors knew her organisation well and had good links and were helpful. *'We have a very good relationship with our council,'* said the manager of a community sector empowerment body from the Midlands. In contrast to this, a community group chair from the North East said that councillors are not necessarily in tune with communities and relationships could be strengthened: *'They think it is their job to put things right as they see fit, not in consultation and tend to impose their own views. It is a good idea for councillors to link with the local community more, but it is not clear how that will work in practice. Some of the best leadership locally is displayed by non-council community representatives. There can be a tendency in some community groups to perceive councils as the root of the problem, not the solution.'*

The general view was that there is a need for skills and expertise of local authority members to effectively and inclusively involve their communities to be developed. It was commonly agreed that training is needed. *'Ensuring all voices get heard is a real skill,'* said a respondent from an umbrella body. A residents' and community groups association representative highlighted worries over the blurring of responsibilities between councillors and community groups and said clarity was needed over who would be responsible for what and skills were needed to manage that demarcation.

## **The Role of Community Groups**



The White Paper's acknowledgement of the importance of the voluntary and community sector in boosting local democracy was viewed positively. Its reassurance that grants funding will continue was welcome. The chair of a community network in the North West said that her initial thoughts on the White Paper were positive but that it is not directional and there are concerns about the details of implementation: *'It could have been bolder.'* It was felt that there was a need for the White Paper to better define what 'community' means and acknowledge the difference between community groups and residents who are not involved in such groups.

In some areas where community groups are well-developed and their relationships with councillors are strong, the aspirations outlined in the White Paper are already happening. But an interviewee who is involved in community groups and board member of two umbrella bodies pointed out that community development is barely mentioned in the White Paper and that the role of Community Empowerment Networks has been diminished. It has not been made apparent where support for community groups taking on the enhanced role required is coming. She added that the role of community groups in building and sustaining civil society has been forgotten as the emphasis has been on their role in service delivery.

### **The Skills and Capacity of Councillors and Community Groups to deliver change**

When asked whether they had the skills and capacity to take on extra roles and responsibilities identified in the Local Government White Paper, our councillors felt that it would very much be dependent on the individual councillor. Whilst some councillors are keen on strong professional development and translating skills and knowledge to the local community, others as a result of being employed full-time themselves simply do not have time to respond to every single issue that is likely to emerge in their community. One councillor stated that their authority was in the process of launching a Member Development Charter, which would be accompanied by a range of skills and training opportunities. The new proposals discussed above

indicate that councillors are likely to need to learn a host of new skills in order to improve local community and local authority relations. For example, delivering projects against devolved budgets will require financial management, project management, delivery and evaluation skills.

When asked about the skills and capacity of community groups to influence local services and strategies in the way that is being proposed in the White Paper, more well-established community groups said that they had the capacity but they were not sure others in their area did. A key issue that was identified is how to get effective community groups operating in deprived areas. A common comment was that the development of skills and capacity needs to be properly resourced. As one community group chair said it is difficult to find the time and commitment among volunteers to deliver what is being proposed. A community group representative thought his organisation had sufficient skills but questioned whether members would be willing to take on more responsibilities and whether financial resources would be available to support this. Even community groups which do have the skills and capacity to influence service delivery and strategy will still need more support, according to one umbrella group representative. She said: *'They are volunteers and a lot of mechanisms are too bureaucratic to be able to engage with the process.'*

While the White Paper stresses the importance of community involvement, an interviewee from the North East said that support for capacity building is not there in practice: *'Our organisation struggles to find funding for capacity building, yet the local authority and other public organisations rely upon us at times when they need to consult with the community.'* She said tools were in place in her area to help involve residents in service delivery, but cuts in staff and funding have brought this to an end. One interviewee said: *'This is raising expectations of what community groups can achieve but it has to be matched with a strategy for community support and resources.'* Another prominent community group chair and umbrella group board member said: *'The Government hasn't made an effort to understand or engage with the community sector on the White Paper and it doesn't say how capacity will be built.'*





## Concluding Thoughts

Whilst councillors and community groups have largely welcomed the Local Government White Paper in theory, there are a number of concerns about its practical implications. There is an overarching concern that it is another example of a central government white paper where more is expected of stakeholders such as councillors and community groups to improve local areas, without really providing the clarity of how proposals will be implemented on the ground and the resources that will be set aside to support the proposals. Whilst for example the proposal for councillors to provide information to local people on services, performance and targets is welcomed, no information is given on how this will be implemented, how it will be resourced and the skills and capacity issues councillors are likely to face.

There are also issues identified from the interviews with community groups of the predominantly urban focus of the White Paper. Although the White Paper is encouraging the establishment of more parishes in urban areas, the representative of a rural community group umbrella body pointed out that governance issues are different in rural and urban areas and that this was not fully addressed in the document, but may be in subsequent guidance. *'In rural areas there are a vast number of different communities spread over a wider area and a more complex structure exists, so we have to see how the leadership role pans out there,'* she said. The White Paper appeared to be written around the role of residents' associations and tenants' associations and their relationship with local authorities, in her view, and is vague on the difference between community groups and parishes. She believes, however, that parish councillors can provide the link between the community and the local authority that the White Paper is keen to enhance.

At CLES, we feel that the White Paper does not quite go far enough in striking the balance between participative and representative democracy. Whilst proposals to enhance representative democracy

through stronger leadership of local councillors are introduced, the paper does not highlight how these will be carried forward and what it will mean for the way in which councillors and local people interact. The Community Call for Action, for example is fine in theory, but how is it going to operate in practice, questions remain as to how do local people get involved and how much will it rely on the individuality of the councillor. Similarly proposals with a participative democracy slant such as the Local Charter fail to highlight particularly how the most vulnerable local people should be involved.

In summing up this research it is possible to identify a number of themes that will need to be considered at central and local levels if the White Paper is to be a success:

- ❑ **Individuality** – the ability of councillors and community groups to respond to the Local Government White Paper will depend on their capacity, skills and willingness to engage with change and new models of engagement with the local authority.
- ❑ **Capacity and Resources** – there needs to be clarification on how the extra responsibility being placed on councillors and community groups will be resourced and the impact it will have on their capacity to deliver for the benefit of local communities.
- ❑ **Clarity on Proposals** – there needs to be greater clarity on how proposals such as the Community Call for Action will work in practice and an identification of how it differs from existing engagement mechanisms.
- ❑ **Devolution** – whilst welcoming the governance changes identified in the White Paper, there clearly needs to be greater resource and power devolution to local authorities and local representatives, particularly over issues of real local concern such as transport and anti-social behaviour.
- ❑ **Identification and Engagement** – in some areas there is strong engagement with councillors and community groups. Good practice should be learnt from these localities and should shape the move from proposals to legislation.



This rapid research was written by Matthew Jackson, Nicola Carroll and Victoria Bradford from the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES). CLES can provide bespoke support and advice on any aspect of policy and can offer further research on any aspect of the Local Government White Paper. To discuss this further or any aspect of this research please contact Matthew or Nicola on 0161 236 7036 or email [matthewjackson@cles.org.uk](mailto:matthewjackson@cles.org.uk) or [nicolacarroll@cles.org.uk](mailto:nicolacarroll@cles.org.uk)