

Corporate Scrutiny Sub-Committee

29 August 2006

Localism and the policy agenda for Local Government



Report of Chris Tunstall, Deputy Chief Executive

Purpose of the Report

- 1 This report is intended to inform the Sub-Committee of the latest Government thinking about 'localism' and the emerging policy agenda for Local Government.

Background

- 2 Whilst there is no universally agreed definition of 'localism', the term has been used to describe approaches which are based on devolving power and resources away from central control and towards front-line managers, local democratic structures and local consumers and communities, within an agreed framework of national minimum standards and policy priorities. The primary aims of the approach appear to be about making services more locally accountable and by devolving more power to local communities, changing the relationship between central and local government and individual citizens and communities.

Policy debates and the forthcoming Local Government White Paper

- 3 The concept has been promoted by various politicians and policy think tanks over the last three to four years and has featured significantly in the Government-sponsored policy debate around the future of local government over the past 18 months.
- 4 Sir Michael Lyons' inquiry into the role and funding of local government has explored localism and the balance of power between central and local government and the communities local government represents and serves.
- 5 The concept has also been promoted and discussed extensively in the 'local:vision' policy debate initiated by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and now being taken forward by the Department for Communities and Local Government. The Department has said that it will publish a White Paper on Local Government in the autumn which will look to improve policy in the following key areas:

:

- **Community/neighbourhood empowerment** – new powers and possibly new governance options for neighbourhoods to address very local issues. Options include neighbourhood service agreements and community powers to trigger reviews or re-commissioning, delegated budgets, neighbourhood policing and management.
 - **Improved local leadership** – reforms to improve leadership/democratic engagement at a local level including the adoption of different political management options such as elected Executives or Mayors, single Member wards, all out elections, enhanced and changed roles for neighbourhood/ward councillors.
 - **Local government as a convener of public services** – changes to increase the capacity for local government to act as a ‘convener’ of local public services through for example turning local strategic partnerships into statutory bodies, placing a duty on other public services to cooperate, using Local Area Agreements as a vehicle for all area-based funding and extending the scrutiny role of councils over a wide range of public services.
 - **Changing the central/local performance management framework** – focussing on a smaller set of national priorities, encouraging more bottom-up/user accountability.
 - **Local government structures** – changes to local government structures in two-tier areas to improve joint working. Options include greater collaboration between the tiers but also reorganisation onto a unitary basis in a small number of selected areas.
- 6 On this last bullet point, Members may wish to note that whilst reorganisation may only take place in a very small number of areas, in the majority of areas which will remain two-tier, the Government has said that ‘status quo is not an option’ to reflect the importance it is attaching to improving local accountability and performance through more localist approaches across the board, irrespective of structure.

Policy commission

- 7 Given the significance of the forthcoming White Paper for the County Council, at its meeting of 25 May 2006, Cabinet agreed to commission some policy work to help the County Council understand and anticipate the emerging policy agenda.
- 8 Under the Office of Government Commerce's Catalist procurement procedures, PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC) have subsequently been commissioned to provide consultancy support to the Chief Executive in identifying and evaluating ways in which the Council can work with partner agencies to become more locally focused and responsive.

- 9 The commission is primarily intended to help the County Council to better understand the localism agenda and challenge our traditional ways of doing things by opening our eyes to best practice elsewhere. What we learn through the commission will be taken forward in discussions with Members and then partners via the County Durham Strategic Partnership and the County Durham Local Area Agreement.

Recommendations

- 10 Members are asked to note the contents of this report and invited to comment upon localism and the themes of the forthcoming White Paper.

Contact: Chris Tunstall Tel: 0191 383 3336

Background papers

Speech by Ruth Kelly MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, to the LGA conference on 5 July 2006

<http://www.dclg.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1501327>

Cabinet 25 May 2006, 'Lyons Inquiry into Local Government', Report of Chris Tunstall, Deputy Chief Executive, Policy and Improvement

Cabinet 3 August 2006, 'local government policy agenda', Report of Chris Tunstall, Deputy Chief Executive

Appendix 1: Implications

Finance

The costs of the policy work can be met from existing resources and if required, contingencies.

Staffing

N/A

Equality and diversity

N/A.

Accommodation

N/A

Crime and disorder

N/A

Sustainability

N/A

Human rights

N/A

Localities and rurality

Community and neighbourhood empowerment is one of the key areas the White Paper will seek to address.

Young people

N/A

Community engagement and consultation

'Local voice' in the sense of greater community consultation and say on local affairs is one the key areas the White Paper will seek to address.

Health

N/A