CITY OF
YORK
COUNCIL

Shadow Executive   18th April 2007

Report of the Director of People and Improvement

The local government white paper and its implications for neighbourhoods

Summary

1.   This report has been prepared in response to Shadow Executive's request for a briefing on, 'The neighbourhoods agenda in the light of the new White Paper and possibilities for improving ward committees and devolved decision making'.

Background

Overview of the white paper

2.   The white paper was published on 26th October 2006 and was followed by the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill which had its first reading on 12th December 2006. The Bill will set in law some of the proposals in the white paper.

3.   The government's vision in the white paper is of "revitalised local authorities, working with their partners, to reshape public services around the citizens and communities that use them". Through the white paper, the government wants to give local communities a greater say in how local services are provided, enable partners to work together more effectively and flexibly to respond to local needs, and reduce top-down control from central government.

4.   The key proposals in the White Paper include:
   •   An enhanced role for Councils as strategic leaders and place shapers – local authorities will have a duty to prepare a Local Area Agreement (LAA) and their leadership role in the Local Strategic Partnership is emphasised
   •   Political leadership to be more focussed, with all Executive powers being invested in the Leader who may then delegate these powers to cabinet
   •   A new performance framework with a new single Comprehensive Area Assessment replacing existing performance assessments such as Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) and Joint Area Reviews (JAR)
   •   Stronger cities and city regions which will be encouraged to develop Multi Area Agreements, crossing local authority boundaries to encourage collaboration on, for example key economic development issues

5.	The government has used the white paper to set out its vision of the expectations on and opportunities for local government and its partners in the future. In the white paper, the government has outlined some of the tools and powers local authorities will need to achieve this vision of excellence. There is some freedom as to how far local authorities go in aiming for the government's vision but they do not have complete discretion – minimum standards of conduct and behaviour which the government requires are already passing into law through the local government bill.

6.	The bill is less ambitious and more pragmatic than the white paper, outlining the minimum response expected by local authorities. However, the expectation is that councils striving for excellence will aim to translate as many of the ideas in the white paper into reality as possible. The government also published an implementation plan for the white paper in January 2007, identifying key work streams for local authorities to focus on and the timetables for their delivery.

The white paper and neighbourhoods

7.	One of the strands of the white paper is a set of proposals to encourage local communities to engage in the process of improving their neighbourhoods. The proposals aim to give more power to local communities to effect change in their areas, for example by raising concerns with their local councillor through the Community Call for Action, or by setting up a group to take on management of a local building. The proposals are highlighted below.

8.	Some implications of the white paper for neighbourhoods:
    • A 'Community Call for Action' process will be introduced whereby residents can raise concerns with their councillor. The councillor will then deal with the issue informally by discussions with the Executive and local service providers. Where the issue cannot be resolved in this way however, the councillor can raise it with scrutiny to investigate. Some issues will be exempt from this process, for example, planning, licensing, council tax and non-domestic rates, because these have a statutory appeals process
    • Through the new Comprehensive Area Assessment, there will be a greater emphasis on consultation with communities and publication of performance information
    • There will be an extension of the power of well-being to parish and town councils which satisfy 'Quality Parish' criteria
    • Councils will have an option to move to single member wards
    • There will be devolution of some powers to local authorities, for example the ability to create and enforce byelaws locally
    • Communities will be encouraged to adopt their own neighbourhood charters – these charters might set out service standards, priorities for local action, community responsibilities for management of services or facilities and the involvements local people can expect about issues that affect them

- There will be a more systematic approach to dealing with local petitions (for example, petitions to be available online)
- Communities will be encouraged to become more involved in neighbourhood management – to this end, there will be a simplified process for setting up and empowering Tenant Management Organisations
- Grants will be awarded to local authorities to refurbish buildings which can then be transferred to the community to be owned and/ or managed. The government has initiated a review of Community Ownership and Management which is due to report in Spring 2007.

9.   The above proposals can be seen as tools for local authorities to focus more on community development if they wish, to move from a situation of primarily consultation and information giving, to one where communities are fully involved in decisions affecting their localities, working in partnership with the council to share responsibility for delivering locally agreed plans. South Somerset District Council and Cumbria County Council are examples of local authorities which have emphasised community development in their work:

- South Somerset won Beacon Status in 2005/06 in the 'Improving Rural Services: Empowering Communities' category. The authority engaged with communities based on a concept of working they called 'Enable, Empower, Deliver'. The authority has enabled communities to deliver solutions to local needs by:
  o Helping them set up appropriate structures and mechanisms for long term delivery
  o Investing in community development staff from different services to support the concept and remove barriers communities faced in helping themselves
  o Building communities' capacity to be engaged
  The council accepted that it had to lose some control of service delivery in order for this method of working with communities to be successful.
  Link: www.southsomerset.gov.uk/index.jsp?articleid=506

- Cumbria works to a framework of community engagement which it has developed, called 'Local Matters'. The council believes that more effective collaboration with communities is the best way to deliver improvements that local people want, and by applying the principles of Local Matters the following benefits will be seen:
  o Improved decision making – ensuring that decisions are based on evidence of local needs
  o Improved savings – providing services that local people want, removing what is not needed and varying provision according to local requirements
  o Improved quality – ensuring effective feedback from communities on service delivery
  o Improved investment – distributing resources for communities fairly
  Link: www.cumbria.gov.uk/communityinformation/localmatters/default.asp

10. As can be seen from the examples above, in order to deliver all that the white paper proposes, council resources, internal leadership and structures may

have to be realigned. In addition, it is not always clear to what extent levels of participation can be raised by the proposals – relationships with communities will need to be developed further to raise their level of trust in the process and their sense of added value from it. Further, if services are devolved to a more local level, this will have implications for how they are planned and coordinated.

11. The points raised above are potentially complex, but work is underway to explore them further as the council's white paper implementation plans are developed this year.

Consultation

12. Officers from Neighbourhood Services have been consulted in preparing this report. The recent paper to the Urgency Committee (27th March 2007) which approved the restructure of neighbourhood Services Directorate excluded the current neighbourhood management unit from consideration. It was expressly stated at para 32 that the impact of the White Paper and the Lyons report might necessitate a restructure of the unit. A service review of the neighbourhood management unit is currently taking place and will be completed in the summer. Recommendations for any structural or service delivery changes will be brought to a future neighbourhoods EMAP for consideration

Options and Analysis

13. As this report is for information only, it does not include any options or analysis for members' consideration.

Corporate Priorities

14. The information within the report relates to the following priorities:

- Improve our focus on the needs of customers and residents in designing and providing services
- Improve leadership at all levels to provide clear consistant direction to the organisation
- Improve the way the council and its partners work together to deliver better services for the people who live in York

Implications

15. There are no financial, legal, HR, equalities, crime and disorder or other implications directly arising from this report.

Risk Management

16. As this report is for information only, it does not include any risk management for members' consideration.

Recommendations

16.   Members are asked to note the contents of this report.

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Background Papers: None