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County Councils Rising to the Challenge: Community Empowerment at work in our neighbourhoods

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Draft text of the speech - may differ from the delivered version.

Thank you very much for the invitation to address you today. It has been fantastic to see the response to the community empowerment white paper.

Local authorities have been really keen to get involved, to think about what more they could do to get residents more involved in shaping the future of their community. But also, of course, keen to share what they have already been doing.

Because the principles which inform this White Paper weren't just dreamed up in central government.

They reflect what people active in local democracy have long recognised.

That giving local people more power makes services more efficient and effective. It makes communities stronger and more cohesive. And it means citizens are more active and more satisfied.

That has certainly been my experience back in Tooting, and I'm sure it is yours too.

So in a sense, this White Paper is about national government catching up with, and reflecting, some of the excellent practice that happens every day, in every community. County councils are no exception.

I know that many county councils about to make the transition to unitary status are looking at this as an opportunity for more direct engagement with residents. They may have felt removed or remote in the past and want to take full advantage of this fresh start - that's great to see.

Wiltshire, for example, is running sessions based around their own DVD to explain what this programme is all about, overcoming any suspicion or prejudice to help residents see that they are really serious about this.

The forthcoming bill

It has now been six months since the White Paper was published, and we've just started the legislation process - in fact, the first committee debates were just yesterday.

I know you've already been talking about this already today, but I just wanted to summarise what I think are some of the major implications for your authorities.

First, that there will be a new duty on local authorities to promote local democracy.

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Of course, many local authorities will already routinely be doing this, in order to be transparent and accountable to voters.

This duty is about making sure that they are all following that example - actively reaching out to residents to explain their actions and choices, and being open to a greater degree of scrutiny, challenge and debate.

Secondly, it's about giving citizens more rights. Making sure that they have all the facts they need to make informed decisions, have more influence over local decision making, and hold their representatives to account.

And thirdly, it's about giving citizens new powers to hold councils to account. Like giving people the right to a response if they sign a petition.

Petitions have long been an easy and popular way for people to express their opinions and ask for a particular course of action.

There's been an explosion of interest in the petitions on the number 10 website. People are raising issues close to their heart - everything from concerns about their local school or skatepark, to foreign policy, to whether Humphrey Lyttleton should get a Knighthood.

It shows how useful people find them as a means of getting their opinions heard. Through this legislation, we can make sure they are always taken seriously, as part of the legitimate democratic process. And people will be able to trigger a full council debate if they aren't satisfied with their response.

In Scotland, a similar system of public petitioning can actually trigger committee investigation or even a full parliamentary debate on the issues - putting issues on the table that otherwise might not get discussed. This helps to inform scrutiny, influence policy, stimulate debate - even change the law. It's something that certainly warrants further thought here.

Legislation isn't the only answer

But actually, it would be really weird if the way we went about empowering communities was simply to legislate, to dictate and define from the centre how it should be done.

Taking an attitude of 'you *will* talk to your constituents and you *will* listen to what they say'. That would be totally contrary to the spirit of devolution and local democracy - and actually, pretty counterproductive.

Instead, I want local authorities to see and treat this as an opportunity to improve the way their community works - not as just another requirement to fulfil.

So I would stress that a change in mindset, a willingness to be more open and to try new ways of involving local people is really what this all about.

That's something we've very much been trying to do nationally.

For example, we've set a group of young advisors to give their advice on everything from the impact of the recession to their hopes for the Olympics.

Hazel recently met with them to talk about what young people need from housing services, and I know she found it really useful - a new and direct insight.

Also nationally, we've been trying to get our own house in order so that it is easier for you to take implementation forward as quickly as possible. And we have made a lot of progress in a very short time.

The Asset Transfer Unit is now open for business - giving local authorities and community groups practical help to negotiate what can be a very complex process.

Devon is one of the authorities leading the way here; overcoming the teething troubles they've had and giving clear guidance to community groups about their expectations.

"community empowerment is more important than ever before."

We've also now got the participatory budget strategy in place - so that by 2012, people

in every area will have a greater say over local spending.

This is already happening in some places. In December, community groups from around Norwich bid for funding raised from council tax levied on second homes.

Does community empowerment matter in a recession?

Finally, I just want to talk for a few minutes about how the relevance of community empowerment in the current economic climate.

There is always a danger that when times get tough, this kind of work is the first to get cut. There may be a tendency to see this as something fluffy and nice - something nice to do if we could afford it, but not essential.

Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. We shouldn't be having a debate about whether we can afford community empowerment. We simply can't afford *not* to have stronger communities.

In fact, I'd argue that given what's going on in the world at the moment, community empowerment is more important than ever before.

In the face of seemingly unstoppable global economic forces, unprecedented instability and uncertainty; when the media is making ever more dire predictions about the coming year, it's understandable that people feel powerless. Even hopeless, lacking a sense of being able to control their own future.

This is about giving them control back. Making them feel that they can take practical action which has a direct impact and visible results for themselves, their families and their neighbourhood.

We can't underestimate the consequences of that for local pride and morale.

Moreover, strong and cohesive communities, open to debate and to collective problem solving, will be more resilient. Better able to respond to the challenges which may come, and to look for the opportunities ahead.

At the same time, giving people control and responsibility for local budgets is a positive way of getting a bigger bang for the taxpayers buck.

When there are growing pressures on local budgets, it is even more important to make sure that investment is going to programmes that local people want, and that they are delivering value for money.

Getting local people involved in these decisions is a really important way of making sure the money is going where they want it to - and ensuring they have a strong stake in the results.

Where local people have got more involved in planning and delivering their own services, you can see real improvements - in everything from regeneration to recycling, public health to public safety.

Finally, I want to stress that this programme isn't something that should wax and wane depending on the economic climate. It's not a short-term initiative. It's part of a much broader programme to reinvigorate every level of government.

As such, it's fundamental to the longer term health of our democracy and society. What could be more significant than that?

Conclusion

We're incredibly fortunate in this country to have a proud tradition of civic pride and activism. An army of volunteers working tirelessly both to tackle global challenges and to improve their own neighbourhood.

These are incredible resources, which are often overlooked, but should not be underestimated. More than ever before, in these uncertain times, we need to draw on these strengths.

Greater participation, putting local people in charge, is the way in which we can do that. Harnessing the potential which exists

in abundance in our areas.

I think this is an incredibly exciting opportunity - a chance to reinvigorate and revitalise local participation and debate, ensuring that local people and communities are involved in the decisions which affect their lives and influence their future.

I am sure that you all have ideas about the best way to do that, and I look forward to a productive discussion.
