

Strong and prosperous communities

The Local Government White Paper





In October 2006 my department published the White Paper, *Strong and prosperous communities*. Its aim is to give local people and local communities more influence and power to improve their lives.

Radical improvements have been made in public services in the last ten years thanks to record levels of investment, strong performance management and the hard work and commitment of local government and others. But for these improvements to continue, we must show our confidence in local government, local communities and other public service providers by giving them more freedom and powers to bring about the changes we all want to see.

Working together, we can continue to improve public services and the quality of life in our communities.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Ruth Kelly'.

Ruth Kelly MP

Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

This White Paper is on the side of individuals and families who want to make a difference, both to their own lives and to the communities in which they live. Our vision is of revitalised local authorities, working with their partners, to reshape public services around the citizens and communities that use them.

This means changing the way we work - to enable local partners to respond more flexibly to local needs; to reduce the amount of top-down control from central government; and to enable citizens and communities to play their part.

Responsive services and empowered communities



People no longer accept the 'one size fits all' service models of old. They want choice over the services they receive, influence over those who provide them, and higher service standards. We want this to be the case everywhere – for people to be given more control over their lives; consulted and involved in running services; informed about the quality of services in their area; and enabled to call local agencies to account if services fail to meet their needs.

Local authorities will involve and consult service users more fully and provide better information about standards in their local area. People will be able to turn to their local councillor to demand an answer to their questions through a new Community Call for Action. And there will be measures to promote increased community ownership and management of local facilities and assets.

We will encourage councils to develop neighbourhood charters setting out local standards and priorities, and to take opportunities to manage services at the level of the neighbourhood, working more closely with neighbourhood policing teams, and giving councillors small budgets to tackle local issues. We will simplify the process for setting up tenant management organisations. The process for creating parishes will be devolved to councils, and communities in London will be given the same right to establish parishes as exists elsewhere, subject to consideration of community cohesion. In addition, the power of well-being will be extended to Quality Parish Councils.

And we will back this up with a stronger legal framework to require local authorities and other best value authorities to secure the participation of local citizens and communities.

Effective, accountable and responsive local government



Councillors should be champions for their local community, able to speak out on all issues affecting their local area and able to sort out issues on the ground or demand a formal response through the scrutiny procedures.

Overview and scrutiny committees will be strengthened, to allow them to call on local public service providers for evidence and demand a response to reports from the council.

Leadership is the single most significant driver of change and improvement in local authorities. In future there will be three choices for councils: a directly elected mayor, a directly elected executive of councillors, or a leader elected by their fellow-councillors with a clear four year mandate. All the executive powers of local authorities will be vested in the leader of the council, with a strong role for the council to scrutinise the leader's actions and approve the budget and major plans.

The way councils best govern themselves will be different in different parts of the country. Local authorities will be able to move to the model of a directly elected mayor or executive by resolution of the council and in consultation with local people. Where they want to, they will also be able to move to whole-council elections and single member wards, improving accountability to voters. We also recognise the potential gains which unitary status can offer, in terms of leadership and efficiency. Councils in shire areas will be able to seek unitary status; we have published information on how to submit proposals and how we intend to handle the small number of proposals conforming with the criteria which we expect to receive. In remaining two-tier areas there will be new opportunities to provide stronger leadership and deliver better value for money.

An independent review will look at incentives and barriers to serving on councils, and the code of conduct will be amended to allow councillors to speak out on licensing and planning issues that matter to their local neighbourhoods.

The making of byelaws will be fully devolved to local authorities and in future they will be more effectively enforced by using fixed penalty notices. We will also devolve most aspects of the conduct regime to local authorities with a streamlined Standards Board refocused as a light touch regulator.

Strong cities, strategic regions



The challenges of the global economy and of sustainable growth require greater power and resources to be devolved to regional and local levels.

Building on recent progress, many of our towns and cities have come forward with proposals that would help promote their further economic development. We will continue to work closely with these local authorities – whether in city-regions or elsewhere – and with those that are interested in developing Multi-Area Agreements which cross local authority boundaries.

The Government will encourage stronger leadership models, including directly elected executives and indirectly or directly elected mayors where such arrangements are supported locally. Our clear, over-riding principle will be that the greater the powers being devolved, the greater the premium on clear, transparent and accountable leadership.

The Department for Transport will propose a package of reforms for Passenger Transport Authorities and Executives to strengthen leadership and enable a more coherent approach to transport in our biggest cities. It will also devolve powers to local authorities across the country to ensure that the bus services their communities need are delivered. We will also promote the concept of city development companies and encourage Employment and Skills Boards to be formed in core cities.

Local government as a strategic leader and place-shaper



Communities need strategic leadership to help bring together local partners to improve the services citizens receive and the local quality of life. Issues such as community safety, health, or community cohesion require local authorities to align services provided by a number of agencies in their area. So we will put in place a new framework for strategic leadership in local areas, bringing together local partners to focus on the needs of citizens and communities.

Local authorities are already under a duty to prepare a Sustainable Community Strategy which sets the strategic vision for an area. We will now require county and unitary local authorities, in consultation with local partners, to prepare a delivery plan for the strategy – known as a Local Area Agreement.

The Local Area Agreement will include a single set of targets for improvement, tailored to local needs, agreed between Government and local partners. In this way, we will focus on the things that really matter to people everywhere, guaranteeing national minimum standards, but leaving room for local innovation and local priorities.

We will introduce a duty for local authorities and other local partners to work together to agree the priorities in the Local Area Agreement. Delivery of local priorities will be the responsibility of partners in key local partnerships like the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership, the children's trust and the new health and well-being partnerships. And, once agreed with Government, local partners will be required to have regard to these priorities for improvement.

A new performance framework



The White Paper sets out a radical simplification of the performance framework for those outcomes secured by local authorities working on their own or in partnership. If we are to continue to improve public services we need to give local authorities and their partners the freedom and powers to meet the needs of their communities and to tackle complex cross-cutting issues like climate change, social exclusion and anti-social behaviour.

There will be around 35 priorities for each area agreed with Government, tailored to local needs through the Local Area Agreement, plus statutory attainment and childcare targets. Instead of the many hundreds of indicators currently required by central government there will be a single set of about 200 outcome-based indicators covering important national priorities.

In addition we will put in place a new regime for dealing with monitoring, support, assessment and intervention. Building on the success of Comprehensive Performance Assessment, the new assessment regime – Comprehensive Area Assessment – will be more proportionate and risk-based and enable more targeted support or intervention when things go wrong.

Efficiency – transforming local services



Significant progress has been made in improving local services but rising public expectations and the challenging financial climate require that councils continue to drive forward the transformation of local services.

Ambitious efficiency gains will be required as part of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review. To help meet these we will encourage greater service collaboration between councils and across all public bodies. We will also support greater use of business process improvement techniques and greater contestability through the use of fair and open competition.

Community cohesion



Diversity has brought enormous economic benefits, but change and migration also create challenges. Stronger local leadership, greater resident participation in decisions and an enhanced role for community groups, can all help local areas to promote community cohesion.

We will work with local authorities facing particular community cohesion challenges; provide support for areas facing difficulties; help share best practice between authorities; and support the establishment of forums on

extremism in parts of the country where they are necessary.

We will also encourage the Commission on Integration and Cohesion to produce more detailed plans on how to deliver a step change in promoting cohesion.

Conclusion

This White Paper is about creating better services and better places. It sets out the tools which will help all local areas tackle the challenges of the 21st century, capture the strength and talents of their citizens and communities, and achieve their full potential.

You can find an electronic copy of the Local Government White Paper at www.communities.gov.uk/strongprosperouscommunitieswp

or you can order a priced paper copy from The Stationery Office Limited and other bookshops, isbn 0 10 169392 3 / 978 010 169392 9.

If you would like to respond directly to Communities and Local Government about the White Paper:

you can email localgovernmentwhitepaper@communities.gsi.gov.uk

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If you require this document in an alternative format, please email alternativeformats@communities.gsi.gov.uk

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