

March 2002

# Evidence To The Commission On Local Governance From The Joseph Rowntree Foundation

## Introduction

The evidence which follows comes mainly from the events and reports funded under JRF's Local Government and Area Regeneration programmes. We recognise however, that local governance includes many other aspects of citizen involvement including tenants and residents groups, school governors, voluntary and community sector activities, faith-based organisations and a wide range of campaigning and pressure groups; all of whom have a vital role to play in safeguarding the strength of democracy at local level.

The comments below are divided into two sections: The first addresses issues raised by the current Local Government White Paper. The second looks more broadly at strengthening local democracy and contains key messages from JRF research on empowering communities. These are somewhat arbitrary distinctions, drawn to assist with structure and clarity of the evidence. In reality, each element is inter-connected; measures taken to develop and empower communities, for example, may also enhance democracy and support strong local government.

### 1. “Strong Local Leadership - Quality Public Services”

Our comments are limited to Part 1 of the White Paper with general points on finance raised as part of the discussion on Chapter 6.

#### a) The vision:

The vision which the Government lays out in the introduction to the White Paper is welcomed and the aspirations contained in paragraphs 1.1 and 1.25 are shared by JRF. However, paragraph 1.8 goes to the heart of the long-standing (and still current) ambiguity in central and local government relations, as discussed in JRF reports “*Living with Ambiguity*” and “*Members one of another*” (out of print) i.e. the degree to which local authorities owe their primary accountability to central government, or to their own local electorate. There remains a question as to whether local government being “held to account for achieving appropriate standards across the country”, because... “Government has a responsibility...”, (para 1.8) is compatible with the White Paper's stated aim of “...enhancing local democracy with local authorities being more clearly accountable to their electorate...” (para 1.17).

#### b) Leading and empowering communities:

The introduction to this section of the White Paper contains ideas and aspirations which are key to the revival of local democracy and the legitimacy of councillors as community leaders. The detailed proposals which follow, many of which accord with the recommendations of JRF research, (e.g. promoting effective community engagement, transparency of decision making, rationalisation of partnerships) will not automatically deliver the outcomes desired because of the need to address some of the basic questions and dilemmas beneath them:

- **Para 2.14:** The development of strong community leadership may place councils in direct opposition to government ideas and policies. Dynamic, high profile mayors will create their own definitions of community leadership informed by the local agenda and their drive, no doubt, to be re-elected. Whilst this may well re-energise local politics to some degree, the resulting tensions do not appear to be acknowledged or planned for within the paper.
- **Para 2.16:** Low turnout is only a symptom which will be hard to tackle without also addressing the lack of engagement which lies beneath it. People, and JRF research indicates young people especially ([Findings Ref: 520](#)), don't believe that voting in local elections makes any difference.

The White Paper does not address the central question of how to re-energise the relationship between the represented and the representative at local level.

Possible ways of improving this include real power being devolved to the neighbourhood level, with stronger local manifestos. The JRF report "Hung authorities elected mayors and cabinet government" by Leach and Game suggests that proportional representation would lead to more hung councils but that this is not barrier to cabinet/mayoral government and would enhance democratic accountability. ([Findings Ref: 660](#))

- **Paras.2.23-2.27:** The assertion that mayors may be particularly appropriate for "failing" councils is not substantiated within the White Paper. There are usually complex reasons why councils under-perform, which are unlikely to be solved by mayors alone. It would appear that visibility is being confused with accountability. The team/partnership approach put forward later in the chapter as a key feature of effective community leadership stands in stark contrast to the narrowing of political and managerial power suggested here.

### **c) Promoting effective community participation:**

- There are no apparent plans to monitor or evaluate the levels of community participation taking place. JRF have supported Yorkshire Forward in developing an

audit tool "*Active Partners*" (Active Partners in regeneration, Yorkshire Forward, 2001) in recognition of the fact that community participation, to mean anything, must be done well, and done consistently.

- There is a danger of consultation overload. We know that, even at a neighbourhood level, people get consultation fatigue, especially on long term strategic documents like community plans which are not "engaging" in their nature.
- The Government has taken a consistent line over the last few years in maintaining that the public doesn't care who delivers a service, even one which directly affects their quality of life; they only care about the quality of the service. If this is an accurate reflection of the relationship between residents and direct services, we are not clear why the Government believes the same residents would wish to vote on the council's constitution, a concept completely remote from most of us!
- Consultation, to mean anything, must visibly affect the outcome, and not repeat questions asked before. This means that much better coordination is needed between public sector bodies in their rush to "ask the people". Different departments of a council have been known to consult the same residents within a month of each other on very similar issues, and the plethora of partnership initiatives such as Surestart, doing needs analyses alongside other public bodies (police, NHS) conducting service specific consultations suggests that the local authority could play a useful role in data sharing and coordination to protect communities from consultation overload.
- The voluntary and community sectors obviously play a vital role in building and sustaining community capacity to engage and contribute to neighbourhood regeneration and participation. This is considered further in section 2.

#### **d) Improvement in delivery of services:**

- The power to charge for discretionary services: The effects of this need to be closely monitored. The finance section of the paper (page 122) recognises some of the problems which arise from the current situation - e.g. the Royal Commission on Long Term Care and the Audit Commission have both expressed concern about the variation in charges for home care. For those on a nationally determined income, e.g. state pension, income support, local charges could be a source of real difficulty - especially in rural areas which do not have the same economies of scale and have additional transport costs.
- New technologies: There is a danger of 'E' being seen as the answer to everything. Those who are already 'excluded' may also become 'e-excluded' - the old, the poor,

the less educated, the disabled. Initial findings from an ongoing JRF project (Housing.support.org) ([Findings Ref: 342](#)) indicate that people are only happy with e-access if it is in addition to direct contact with service providers and not if it replaces this with a 'call centre' response. This aim of increasing public access must not be overshadowed by the cost cutting agenda which is a powerful driver in this area.

- An additional danger is that a focus on e-delivery, alongside the current 'consumer' language being used in relation to public services, will set councils up to fail. Local authorities do not deliver services like the private sector, where money is the only exchange. Local authorities manage **rationing and entitlement** to services, either on eligibility or cost, which constitutes a fundamental difference in the service provider/consumer relationship.
- In addition, the White Paper has expended several paragraphs on public engagement and the revival of democracy. This is not going to be achieved by encouraging residents to view their council like Woolworths - we don't spend our energy on voting for the store manager or being consulted on the mission statement for the company.

If private sector language has to be used, residents should be seen as far more like shareholders (than customer), who have invested their time and council tax and should have some control, at a strategic level, over what happens to 'their' company.

#### e) A National Framework:

- The JRF interim report on "*External Inspection of Local Government*" (Davis, Downe and Martin) ([Findings Ref: 921](#)) drew attention to the unreliable and often arbitrary nature of some of the data used in inspections. The authors reiterated the Select Committee's (2000) comments that local government is being "inspected to destruction... diverting resources from service provision, stifling innovation, lowering morale and creating confusion". **In addition, they comment that the level of public support for external inspection has never been tested in a rigorous way.**
- It should also be noted that the proposed CPA assumes that an overall measurement of council performance is meaningful, when in fact the disparity within councils can be greater than between them. This, together with the data issue, make the link between overall performance and freedoms rather a lottery.
- The need to support councils is also recognised as being as important as inspection in sustaining improvement and this is to be welcomed.
- The improved coordination of inspection regimes via the Best Value Inspectorate

Forum is a very welcome suggestion and making inspection proportionate to performance is affirming for local authorities who are genuinely trying to improve their performance across a range of service areas. However, the proportionate response and improved coordination will only be effective if they are truly cross departmental objectives at national Government level. DTLR's supportive approach, as evidenced in some sections of the White paper, needs to be matched by a similar shift in approach across Whitehall.

- Local PSAs appear to offer a partnership approach which takes both local and national priorities into account. Messages from pilot authorities are, even at this early stage, pointing to a worrying lack of delivery from Government departments on 'their side of the bargain', echoing the fears expressed above.

#### **f) Freedom to deliver:**

- The rationalising of plans and area based initiatives will be of assistance both to authorities and communities. However, safeguards must be put in place to ensure that powerful local players do not snaffle the cash again for high profile projects with quick wins or visible capital outputs. Community capacity building and developing provision for 'invisible' groups such as community support for the mentally ill, low level, long term provision, is likely to get further marginalised.
- Accountability issues are not addressed directly enough in many sections of the White Paper, including those discussing partnerships and finance. Area based initiatives provide some excellent examples of how decision making is fragmented between different levels and different organisations leading to opaque systems, no real and open debate about conflicts of interest and the unexplained reallocation of resources (e.g. the 'play' money goes to landscaping rather than the playworkers that local people requested). Mawson ([Findings Ref: 121](#)) points to the need to strengthen intermediary bodies in the voluntary sector to support grass-roots involvement...or they may be swept away in the 'freedoms to deliver' for local authorities.

#### **g) Support for councils:**

The recognition of the need to invest in supporting councils and building their capacity to deliver is a very welcome part of the White Paper. However, a number of key issues remain:

- Proposals duck the issue of how political structures and party pressures can negate even the most wonderful leadership training programme!
- There is an assumption that the skills needed by both members and officers are the

same across all local authorities. As Barry Quirk pointed out in "[Esprit de Corps](#)", the skills needed for a large authority in crisis are not those needed to manage a small 'stuck in a rut' rural district. Working with mayors may change the skills required by both officers and elected members.

- The approach is very managerial. The White Paper does not mention culture change, which is the key requirement coming from JRF reports in area regeneration, social care and other policy areas too. Any support or reform of the local political system is also absent from consideration. This is becoming ever more pressing as the recent IDeA audit of councillors shows. The party machines seem incapable of producing members who are representative of the communities they serve, in spite of their best efforts in some areas.
- There may also be a need for Government to offer councils a period of stability in which to concentrate on learning rather than chasing the next PI tick.

#### **h) Investing for improvement:**

This chapter contains the clearest evidence that the old 'ambiguities' referred to earlier are still very much with us. The thrust of the financial freedoms proposed are to reward those who meet the Government's agenda, rather than those who succeed on their own terms. There is less evidence here of the 'new equality' between central and local government trumpeted in earlier chapters.

- Stoker and Travers argue in "[A new account?](#)" that a stronger local tax base is not a prerequisite for greater local autonomy. What is needed, they contend, is a greater acceptance of local diversity, a pan government acceptance that accountability is primarily to the local taxpayer and more local control over how money is spent, rather than raised.
- Detailed proposals in the Finance Section make a rather dubious distinction between 'ring fenced' and 'targeted' elements of the grant. Targeted grant, being money for a local government priority, e.g. neighbourhood renewal, and ring fenced being for a particular service. Both serve to undermine confidence in local authorities to deliver in a way which is appropriate for their area.
- PSAs are the favoured mechanism for linking local and central agendas. Currently, PSAs are set with local authorities only - not with partnerships - which is a weakness.

#### **i) Working together for better outcomes:**

Proposals contained in the White Paper on regional government will be key to the effectiveness of all levels of government improving the way they work together. It would seem sensible to consider both together if timing permits.

- The commitment to monitor and evaluate is welcomed. It is hoped that evaluation will be as independent as possible and include an assessment of impact on local communities as well as local and central government effectiveness.
- This is a very short chapter and gives a clear message that Whitehall doesn't really need to change anything much. There is no mention of a coordinated cross-departmental approach to local government, an issue which Mawson and many other commentators have identified as key to improving central local relationships.
- Overall, the White Paper confirms David Walker's view (in *Living with Ambiguity*) that the future for local Government looks every more 'corporatist' and that partnership is fine for implementation, but not for agenda setting.
- There is much in the paper that accords with JRF research findings, especially on service delivery and area-based approaches. However, to some degree, the big issues have been ducked and any real devolution of power to influence the national agenda or prioritise the local agenda, appears to be still some way off.

## **2. Strengthening communities and revitalising local democracy**

### **a) The role of the voluntary and community sectors:**

- For many people, the voluntary and community sectors (V&Cs) provide a route far superior to formal democratic structures for the expression of values and beliefs and for civic engagement. The immediacy of impact and quality of relationships involved are in stark contrast with the increasing distance of politicians at all levels, and the belief that an individual vote makes very little difference.
- Government has, in recent years, recognised the importance of the V&Cs, including them in mainstream service delivery, partnership programmes such as area regeneration and The Children's Fund, and in the development of national and local compacts. However, many feel that the cost of inclusion has been incorporation and a narrowing of the boundaries within which voluntary and community sector activity is deemed acceptable. The managerial approach applied to local authorities by central government is being passed down, perhaps sometimes inappropriately, to the V&Cs using contract purchasing, best value, output targets and a 'seat at the table' where

often responsibility is shared with no concurrent sharing of authority or control.

- Similar levels of mistrust, suspicion and resentment can be evident between the V&Cs and local government as those between central and local government with similar underlying causes:
  - one seeing the other as a delivery mechanism rather than a true partner;
  - competition and insecurity about relative democratic/representational legitimacy;
  - control through resource allocation, justified on the grounds of a higher order 'accountability'.
- Clearly local government and the V&Cs also have common cause in ensuring high quality and appropriate local service delivery, especially to disadvantaged residents and communities. More importantly, they share both the aims and benefits of strong citizen involvement in debate, policy development, voluntary activity and service user empowerment. The active promotion and support of this joint agenda is a key route for the re-energising of local democracy and we welcome the initiatives taken by several local authorities in this regard.
- JRF research points to a number of positive changes which would improve voluntary/statutory relationships at a local level and promote engagement:
  - i) Building sufficient time into development processes to build the trust required for sustainable cooperation;
  - ii) Re-organising services in ways which are not only multi-agency, but also cut across normal departmental and agency boundaries and have local people represented at all levels. ([Findings Ref: HR248](#))
  - iii) Structures for accountability need to be 'fit for purpose', transparent and resource efficient, i.e. they should make sense to service users or residents as much as to local authority grant monitoring officers. ([Findings Ref: 251](#))
  - iv) Reaffirmation is required of the wide range of volunteer activities which constitute active citizenship. ([Findings Ref: SP119](#)) The contract culture, increasing pressure on the V&Cs to become 'professionalised' and deliver services as the only route to stable funding and valid status, can undermine an honourable tradition of dissent and constructive criticism within the V&Cs. Campaign and lobbying activity needs to be supported and accepted by local government as important contributions to active citizenship which enhance local democracy.

## **b) Devolution of power to neighbourhoods:**

- While it is true that the political and economic forces which shape our lives are increasingly operating at an international or even global level, it is also true that ideas, innovation and the power to effect change are distributed more widely than ever before; through the media, new technologies, the commercial and social sectors. People are often less willing to accept institutional authority, without questioning its relevance and legitimacy; but at the same time they are willing to become engaged (and cast their vote) when they can see a clear impact on the daily lives of fellow citizens: the 'Big Brother', 'Pop Idol' phenomena.
- Local authorities are, we believe, in a unique position to build on the continued importance of visible localised change, reaffirming the effectiveness of communal activity in producing and sustaining progress.
- Local government is becoming increasingly effective at working in partnership, indeed it often leads the field ahead of the private sector and central government. A major challenge for partnership working is not simply to deliver and plan services in a better way, though this is key to success; but also to inspire changes in culture - officers working on behalf of communities rather than institutions; service users as equal partners, etc.
- JRF research on devolution of power to the neighbourhood level consistently highlights the need for local government as a whole, officers, members and systems, to facilitate and support a form of democratic engagement which respects the knowledge, status and need for self-determination of communities; providing genuine opportunities for people to take active responsibility for devising collective solutions to their problems.
- The culture and systems change required to achieve this should not be underestimated. In areas where progress is being made, elected members are supporting communities to take risks, and being there to pick up the bits if the ideas fail. Councillors can act as the custodians of local democracy in their ward, rather than its sole embodiment: Officers can work for communities with guidance from councillors instead of vice versa.
- Local authorities can give local democracy a new relevance and vibrancy, enhancing their own legitimacy through the devolution of decision making. It is axiomatic that this opportunity should be made available to all communities. The JRF research findings referenced below come from studies addressing the needs of disadvantaged communities. The messages are however, equally valid for neighbourhoods which do

not face particular social or economic difficulty, but want to play a more active part in shaping their futures.

- Several of the key findings below require action from central as well as local government. JRF would encourage local authorities to continue to work together with communities in lobbying for the changes and support required to enhance and develop viable structures for sustainable devolution of decision making.

i) Getting the structures right: The two main vehicles for local devolution currently in operation are area committees and neighbourhood management. Research undertaken by Sullivan et al ([Findings Ref: 761](#)) indicate that, unless authorities develop a clear strategy to support the inter-relationship of area and strategic decision making, the tensions between the two mechanisms will have negative effects on both.

This study also highlights that community leadership and decision making at area level must be linked to authority wide executive and scrutiny functions, and quality and service development drivers such as Best Value. Furthermore, councillors will need support to manage the links between area, authority, sub-regional and regional decision making, not only for the authority but for the benefit of partners and communities too.

ii) Effective partnerships: Lessons from the New Commitment to Regeneration (Hilary Russell, Nov. 2001) ([Findings Ref: N51](#)) point to the importance of allowing enough time for trust to develop to build joint ownership and confidence in the partnership approach. Many local authorities do not start this process from a neutral base. Evidence shows that communities see councillors and local authority officers as barriers to change and the 'controlling stakeholders' in unequal partnerships (Purdue et al, 2000) ([Findings Ref: 720](#)). Of course, many residents realise that their interests have to be balanced with other valid issues, councillors have a key role in ensuring that 'bottom up' concerns are supported by 'top down' institutional structures and that a recognisable difference is made through local engagement.

Hilary Russell also identified that NCR pathfinders still had some way to go in the vital task of developing impact measures which enabled local stakeholders and communities to track change and hold them to account.

iii) Support from central government: Both Russell and Taylor ([Foundations Ref: 310](#)) stress the importance of a strong lead from central government and practical action to tackle some of the barriers to effective local decision making

which lie beyond local authority control. These include avoiding unnecessary and complex monitoring and regulation systems, provision for flexibility in financial frameworks and a willingness to bend national targets in response to local priorities.

iv) New skills and fresh approaches: The experience of service user groups, carers, minority ethnic communities and faith groups, who have become involved in partnership approaches to service delivery, provides important lessons for neighbourhood management. Research undertaken by Barr et al (2001) ([Findings Ref: 211](#)) into the impact of using a community development approach to deliver community care services highlighted the importance of:

- community development skills for councillors, staff and community leaders;
- community leaders playing a key role as conveners of community interests and channels for new ideas and innovation. They were also seen as having perseverance and a longer term commitment than paid staff, and a greater understanding of both the capacities and limitations of the communities they came from.
- senior managers willing to adopt a culture of participative accessible governance, and to accept increasing interdependence between stakeholders.

v) Active inclusion: Research undertaken to examine black and minority ethnic organisations' experience of local compacts ([Findings Ref: 122](#)) highlighted the importance of taking positive action to resource and support the involvement of previously excluded sections of the community. Black and minority ethnic voluntary and community groups felt marginalised in policy debates and used by local authorities and others to deliver on their agendas rather than developing joint goals. It is clear from this study and other research that the black and minority ethnic voluntary sector is overstretched and underfunded. Local authorities as a whole and individual councillors with their wards, can assist to promote and secure the involvement of minority groups. This offers real opportunities to extend and affirm the power of local democracy as well as promoting community cohesion.

## Conclusion

JRF research points consistently to the vital role local government plays in the regeneration of communities, the delivery of services (particularly to disadvantaged residents) and the balancing of the myriad of views and concerns expressed by local stakeholders. These factors combined with their electoral mandate mean that councillors are the uncontested candidates for community leadership at the authority wide level.

The future for local government is, however, closely tied to developments at the neighbourhood level. Authorities have the opportunity to become the promoters and defenders of local democratic engagement in all its forms, securing both their legitimacy and relevance for the twenty-first century. The alternative could be an increasingly managerial model where “Bradford Council” becomes indistinguishable from “Bradford plc”, with less room for diversity and participation. Local government has within it the power and ability to regenerate local democracy and it needs no authority delegated from central government or finance from the private sector to undertake this endeavour. The wellbeing of our communities and the future health of local democracy is, to a large extent, dependent upon the community leadership offered by local authorities. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, through its research and change activities, looks forward to supporting local government to meet this challenge.