

## ULG/81/2006

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### Local Government White Paper “Strong and Prosperous Communities”

**This circular gives branches an overview of the proposals contained in the recently published Government White Paper on the future of local government.**

The Government has just published their long-awaited White Paper on the future of local government – “**Strong and Prosperous Communities**”. This sets out proposals for reforming the role of local government, and highlights a key role for strong partnerships between local government, other local service providers and local communities.

It has been released shortly before the Lyons report is due out. The Lyons report, which also looks at the future of local government, is due in December.

#### Comments on the proposals

Communities Secretary Ruth Kelly said that the proposals aimed to:

“give local authorities a stronger role in leading their communities and bringing services together to address local needs and problems. Central government will play its part in guaranteeing minimum standards and setting overall national goals, but we will step back and allow more freedom and flexibility at the local level.

In exchange, we expect to see more accountability to local citizens, stronger local leadership, better and more efficient services and a readiness to support tougher intervention when things go wrong. The White Paper sets out how we intend to achieve this re-balancing between central government, local government and local people.”

UNISON Head of Local Government, Heather Wakefield, initially responded to the report by saying:

“We welcome this clear sign that local government is to be given a stronger role in securing quality public services for local communities. That is what people want and that is what local government workers want to deliver.

These proposals are taking place against a backdrop of massive efficiency savings and cuts in jobs. Joined up service delivery is important but it requires a joined up approach to the workforce. Local government workers will be quite rightly sceptical about this, particularly since they face cuts to their pension rights, unlike civil servants and other public sector workers.

UNISON will expect to be consulted further on what the proposals will mean for the workforce, because no matter how much the Government wills it, you won't get successful change unless you bring the workforce with you."

## **The proposals**

"Strong and Prosperous Communities" is in two volumes. The first volume describes the proposals themselves. The second volume of the report examines how major areas of local services will be affected by the changes. It looks at community safety, health and well-being, vulnerable people, children, young people and families, economic development, housing and planning, climate change and the role of the third sector. The different sections are designed so they can be read without cross-referencing the rest of the paper.

The full White Paper is available at [www.communities.gov.uk/strongprosperouscommunitieswp](http://www.communities.gov.uk/strongprosperouscommunitieswp) but some of the key White Paper proposals are detailed below:

### **Stronger and more stable local authority leadership**

Leadership will be put on a firmer footing than ever before by requiring councils to change to one of three strong leadership models.

- Directly Elected Mayor with a four year term - a directly elected individual
- Directly Elected Executive with a four year term - alongside electing a mayor or council leader voters also directly elect the council's cabinet
- Council leader with a four year term - voters elect councillors, and then councillors chose the council leader

At present, many council leaders are elected on an annual basis which can discourage strong, ambitious and stable leadership. All three models share a four year term with all the executive powers held by one individual. This four year mandate - similar to central Government - will not only mean stronger local government, but greater stability as well, removing an existing barrier to both good government and the effective delivery of the services people actually want.

### **Effective, Accountable and Responsive Local Government**

In addition to the strengthening of leadership arrangements, we will secure effective, accountable and responsive local government across the country by:

- Giving overview and scrutiny committees of councils new powers to review the actions of key public bodies and require the Council executive and other public bodies to respond
- Requiring councils to publicise overview and scrutiny recommendations and the responses to those recommendations

- Providing a short window of opportunity and invitation for a small number of councils keen to seek unitary status (subject to criteria), and pushing for better joint working for all two-tier areas.
- Reforming the current Standards Board and implementing a more locally-based conduct regime. This will enable councillors to speak up on all local issues, including planning and licensing, and take them to Overview and Scrutiny.

## **Responsive Services and Empowered Communities**

Proposals include:

- Strengthening the ability of councillors to act as champions for their community via a new 'Community Call for Action'. This will give local people a more powerful voice to question decisions taken by their council, with councillors able to raise all issues from housing, to leisure facilities to waste management with a Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee on residents' behalf. This will bring all council services in line with proposed Home Office legislation on community safety.
- Providing better and more timely information on the quality of local services, including annual publication of local authorities' performance against national outcome indicators and a set of indicators on citizen satisfaction. Additionally, we will encourage the Audit Commission to place greater emphasis on satisfaction indicators in its inspections.
- Reviewing the barriers to increasing community management and ownership of under-used local community assets so that these better serve local communities, with a new fund to support local authorities refurbishing assets for transfer to community groups.
- Making it easier to set up a tenant management organisation, giving tenants more control over their homes and neighbourhoods.
- Devolving the right to set up parish councils to local government and giving communities in London the same right to establish parishes as elsewhere, provided this does not undermine community cohesion and there is clear local support. Quality parish councils will have a general power of well-being, with considerable scope to act to promote or improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area.
- In future, councils will be able to determine local byelaws and enforce these through fixed penalty notices without agreement from central Government
- Revising the Best Value duty to secure the participation of citizens and communities in the delivery of local public services. It will be the responsibility of local public service providers to inform and consult their communities and, where appropriate, to devolve service delivery or management to them.

- Encouraging councils to develop local charters setting out service standards and priorities. Local authorities will also be encouraged to put in place standard procedures for dealing with petitions.
- Encouraging neighbourhood management teams to develop links with neighbourhood policing, so neighbourhood wardens, street wardens, Police Community Safety Officers and local police work as part of an integrated team to improve responsiveness to communities.
- In addition, we will encourage councils to provide councillors with small budgets to address local issues quickly.

### **Strong Cities; Strategic Regions**

We want to maintain the renaissance in our cities, enabling them to compete on a global scale. But we believe the greater the powers being devolved, the greater the premium on clear, transparent and accountable leadership. In order to support our towns, cities and other areas to drive regional and national economic growth we will:

- Continue to work closely with those local authorities who have already come forward with proposals to help promote their further economic development - whether in city-regions or elsewhere, and recognising that there is no one size fits all model.
- Work with those local authorities interested in developing Multi-Area Agreements to facilitate greater cross boundary collaboration on key economic development issues in towns, cities and other areas.
- Promote city development companies and encourage Employment and Skills Boards to be formed in core cities.
- The Department for Transport will propose a package of reforms of Passenger Transport Authorities and Executives to strengthen leadership and enable a more coherent approach to transport in our biggest cities.
- Encourage stronger leadership models including directly elected executives and indirectly or directly elected mayors where such arrangements are supported locally.

### **Bring in a new performance framework for local government**

Freeing up local authorities and partners to innovate whilst retaining accountability will support citizen empowerment and help secure better outcomes. Proposals include:

- Defining in CSR07 a clear set of Government priorities, with 1,200 national indicators slashed to a single set of around 200, measuring issues of nationwide importance including where minimum standards are essential e.g. climate change, social exclusion and anti-social behaviour.

- Agreeing through Local Area Agreements, a single set of around 35 specific improvement targets for each local area, plus the statutory targets for childcare and educational attainment.
- Shifting to risk-based assessment, enabling targeting of inspection where it can add most value.

### **Local Government as a Leader and Place-Shaper**

Communities need strategic leadership to help bring together local partners to improve services and shape the places where we live. 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.
- Set out in statutory guidance our expectation that local authority leaders will play a leading role on Local Strategic Partnership boards - with an opportunity to agree the chair of the LSP board.
- Strengthen local partnership working by requiring the local authority and named local partners to cooperate with each other to agree the priorities in the Local Area Agreement. And once agreed, named local partners will be required to have regard to relevant targets for improvement.

UNISON will issue further guidance to branches on “Strong and Prosperous Communities” in the forthcoming weeks.