

# REPORT BACK ON CONFERENCE/SEMINAR

**REPORT TO:** Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee

27<sup>th</sup> June 2007

**REPORT OF:** Head of Corporate Policy

**TITLE:** Driving Improvement for People and Places

**DATE:** 6/7 March 2007

**VENUE:** Crowne Plaza Hotel, Nottingham

## **1 Recommendation**

1.1 You are recommended to note the report

## **2 Background**

2.1 *"Driving Improvement for people and places"* was the title of the annual LGA improvement conference and exhibition held in Nottingham on 6/7 March 2007.

2.2 The conference was attended by Cllr Taylor, Cllr McNicholas and Roger Hughes.

## **3 Cost of attending**

3.1 The conference fee was £320 + VAT per person plus travelling costs for Cllr McNicholas and Roger Hughes. Cllr Taylor qualified for a free place at the conference as he was one of the speakers.

## **4 Benefits**

4.1 The conference provided an opportunity to learn more about the implications of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill and the Lyons Review.

4.2 Tony Travers of the London School of Economics spoke on *"The Improvement Agenda: Tackling the Challenges Ahead"*. He pointed out that public expenditure had increased from 37% to 43% of GDP in seven years and suggested that taxation has reached a level which no major party wishes to exceed. However, public demands for services continue to rise and people wanted "Sweden's services with America's taxes". Although the UK probably had among the most efficient and effective public services in the world, demands for further efficiencies were inevitable and the Comprehensive Spending Review would herald the start of a long period of zero growth in real local public spending.

4.3 Michael O'Higgins, Chair of the Audit Commission, echoed this theme. He argued for a culture of direct involvement with citizens at the outset of service design and for consultation to be placed at the heart of local authority activity. He stressed the

importance of councils really understanding their communities and the need for good quality data on which to base decisions.

- 4.4 Cllr Ken Taylor spoke on the political leadership of improvement. He emphasised the need for local councils to be supported more and inspected less. Councils need more freedom to determine their own priorities and less prescription from Whitehall. The challenge facing council leaders was to build a council with a clear vision, a good understanding of community needs and the confidence to innovate and take risks. To deliver successfully, councils need to build credibility with all their stakeholders, win support from their citizens and maintain high staff morale.
- 4.5 Lucy de Groot, Executive Director of the IdeA stressed the need for councils to improve customer care. She challenged local government to take responsibility for driving sector-wide improvement, build national partnerships to shape local service improvement and to collaborate with all its partners to focus on local priorities and value for money. She emphasised the need for inspectorates to work with councils to ensure the new performance regime reflects a better local-central balance and share knowledge and expertise on performance, risk and good practice. She called on central government to deliver on the promise of Local Area Agreements, reduce the burden of centrally driven targets and demonstrate cross-departmental trust in local government's democratic ability to lead its own improvement.
- 4.6 Darra Singh, Chair of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion set out some of the headline findings from the Commission's Interim Statement, launched in February 2007. A MORI poll carried out for the Commission showed that 60% of people surveyed identified the inability to speak English as the key barrier to "being English" – the Commission is now considering how to foster personal responsibility around speaking English. 57% of people in the MORI poll thought that some groups in Britain get unfair priority when it comes to public services – although only 25% agreed that other people were getting unfair priority over them in their local area. This suggests that the perception that some groups get preferential treatment may be partly a result of the national debate rather than personal and local experience.
- 4.7 Mr Singh stressed that integration and cohesion is everyone's business. All councils face the challenges of building cohesive communities. The benefits are safer, stronger communities with a rich mix of diversity, cultures, faiths, beliefs and lifestyles. Local government should lead by example and individuals should be supported to take on individual responsibility to integrate and be involved.
- 4.8 Sir Michael Lyons trailed – but could not reveal any detail about – his forthcoming report. He emphasised the role of councils as "place-shapers", defining this as:
  - pursuing the well-being of a place and the people that live there
  - building and shaping local identity
  - speaking for a community and ensuring small voices are heard
  - maintaining cohesiveness
  - regulating behaviours
  - resolving disagreements
  - strengthening the local economy
  - understanding local needs and preferences – making sure the right priorities are delivered
  - working with other bodies.
- 4.9 Andrew Campbell, Director of Local Strategic Partnerships and Performance at the DCLG outlined the latest thinking on the new local government performance framework.

He emphasised that the White Paper moves Local Area Agreements "from the margins to the mainstream" of the relationship between central and local government.

4.10 Julie Wyeth of the DCLG LAA Transition, Local Agreements and Partnerships Division said the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill proposed a stronger role for local authorities to lead their communities, shape their areas and innovate in response to local needs in exchange for more bottom-up accountability, better and more efficient services and tougher intervention when things go wrong. She confirmed that LAAs will become the only place where targets are agreed with government on the outcomes delivered by local government on its own or in partnership and that there would be a radical reduction in overall target numbers.

List of background papers

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