

Friday 19 October 2007 11:52
Communities and Local Government (East)

Hazel Blears - Great Yarmouth and Ipswich Councils named as empowerment champions

Communities Secretary Hazel Blears will today publish an 'empowerment action plan' - setting out how the Government will deliver on its commitment to bring about greater devolution and empower communities.

The action plan, produced in partnership with the Local Government Association, makes clear how more people will be given more power over their communities in everything from tackling anti-social behaviour, managing social housing, tackling litter and fly tipping and improving playgrounds and parks.

Funding of £35 million will back up the actions in the plan and support the successful delivery of the community empowerment agenda.

Great Yarmouth and Ipswich Councils have been named by Hazel Blears as two of 18 councils - two from every region of the country - as 'empowerment champions'. Already pioneering a range of people power measures, these councils will work with other areas of the country to show empowerment in practice, share the lessons they have learned and help others to revive their local democracy through twinning programmes and regional empowerment road shows.

Data from the 2007 Citizenship survey published this month showed that only 37% of people feel they can influence decisions affecting their local area. Even fewer (20%) feel they could influence decisions affecting Great Britain.

Too few people feel able to make a difference in their local area. But, where people are given greater say in how decisions affecting them are taken not only do people feel more empowered but satisfaction with public services rises too.

Giving people greater access to local budgets, more power to trigger petitions, a bigger say for young people to decide the kind of services they want are all practical ways of getting people involved in local democracy. The action plan will dramatically expand and accelerate the programmes currently underway at both central and local government level to devolve more power to local people. Hazel Blears will say she wants to see real momentum behind this agenda now and make clear that within five years her ambition is that part of a public budget should be devolved for local decision making in every local authority area.

Hazel Blears said:

"This action plan is about turning rhetoric into reality. We have talked about devolution, now we need to step up a gear; to go further and faster and to be more ambitious about what we want achieve.

"A number of authorities are leading the charge for empowering people doing excellent work. Now I want local government to grasp the opportunities that devolution brings across the country. This action plan will bring about a transformation and reinvent the way we govern by bringing 'devolution to the doorstep'."

The plan includes:-

Funding of £35 million over the next three years will back the delivery of the action plan and help make empowerment a reality in every community.

Empowerment Champions 18 local authorities will act as empowerment champions to spearhead a reinvigoration of local democracy. Selected because of the pioneering work they have already done in involving local people, these authorities will work with Government to drive change across the country. They will encourage other areas and councils to devolve more power by demonstrating the results that they have achieved across a diverse range of neighbourhoods.

Community kitties in every Local Authority. At the moment at least 10 local authorities are piloting participatory budgeting - giving people a direct say in how public funding should be spent. Local people have told councils what their priorities are e.g. more neighbourhood wardens to tackle drug dealing, traffic calming in local streets etc and have been given a say in how best to use funding to address these issues. The ambition is that within five years residents in every Local Authority area should be given a direct say in how money is spent. CLG will consult on how best to make this happen.

A bigger say for young people in spending decisions. By 2010 local authorities will be able to devolve up to 5 per cent of their budget for youth services with young people deciding how that money is spent. By 2018, young people could actively shape decisions on one quarter of these budgets.

More assets to communities. In many areas local authorities have already transferred assets such as disused buildings, or old swimming pools to local groups. The Government wants to accelerate this process and is looking closely at how the initial pilot work is going with a view to publishing a toolkit for local authorities and community organisations in Spring 2008.

Petitions. The Government wants to find ways to give more power to people to trigger action on their priorities by raising the status of petitions and ensure that

where people put their time and energy behind a cause or concern that time is not wasted. A consultation on how best to make this happen will be launched shortly.

A concordat between central and local government that will shape the future relationship between central and local government. A concordat is being developed with the Local Government Association which should establish for the first time an agreement on the rights and responsibilities of local government, including its responsibilities to provide effective leadership of local areas and to empower local communities wherever possible.

Shaping policy through Citizens Juries on community cohesion (the importance of English language) and housing growth. The first of a series of juries will be held by Communities and Local Government in the coming months with views being sought on these two vital issues.

Duty to Involve From 1 April 2009 (subject to parliamentary approval) a new duty will require local authorities to inform, consult and involve local people in local decisions, policies and services. Local people will know what services are on offer, how the authority is performing and how they can have their say.

Innovative Involvement. Key to empowering people is finding new, modern ways to give people a say. A new website -<http://www.peopleandparticipation.net> launched today by Government in partnership with Involve will provide practical advice and support to those at the front line creating opportunities to influence decision-making. The site includes an interactive tool which helps people select participatory methods based on their specific circumstances. There are examples of empowerment from around the world and opportunities for people to share their own success stories and questions to inspire others.

Hazel Blears said:

"Local action is more important than ever. Getting more communities involved in decision making will be the key to finding the solutions to some of the biggest challenges currently facing the country such as obesity and climate change.

"We have an opportunity to turn around a pervading sense of apathy with politics, re-engage people with their local community and encourage people to take a more active role in making public services work for them. The reasons for devolution are clear - where change is made as a result of local involvement with strong community buy-in, trust is greater, decisions are better and the change is longer lasting.

"People are being given a greater say in the way that public money is spent and how policies are developed. I am confident that the professionalism and vision of

local government together with the ambition and commitment of local people will deliver results."

"I do not underestimate the challenges that devolution will bring but local leaders have a chance to show that local solutions can be best and I am confident that they will rise to that challenge."

Chairman of the Local Government Association, Sir Simon Milton, said:- "Our ambitions are to work with local people to improve public services, widening both access and choice, and offering opportunity for all by creating attractive, vibrant, prosperous, safe and friendly places where people are proud to live. "There is, however, a further challenge. There has been an erosion of democracy, a cynicism with politicians and with the ability of seemingly unreachable political structures to deliver solutions. These proposals will go part of the way to addressing people's feelings of powerlessness but only within a national context of councils being given the power to change the places where they live for the better.

"We have shared ambitions between central and local government. We have a consensus across Westminster that we need a decentralising, devolving and deregulating agenda in order to improve public services and strengthen local democracy."

Hazel Blears has promised a new era of freedom for town halls, a huge cut in red tape, and a new relationship between Whitehall and the town hall.

Last week the cutting back of government targets showed the Government committed to this agenda and willing to play its part. In order to make 'devolution to the doorstep' a reality, these changes must go hand in hand with local authorities making strong links to their local communities and giving local people a bigger say in the decisions that affect them.

The action plan sets out the practical steps that will be taken by both central and local government to deliver on the government's vision of shifting power from the centre, involving more people in the decision making process and bringing about what the Prime Minister has called 'a reinvention of the way we govern'.

The action plan is an opportunity to make real changes to the way government does things - both nationally, and locally - and to deliver high quality services responsive to people's needs.

The plan is published on People and Participation.net (<http://www.peopleandparticipation.net>), a new resource launched today to help people across the country influence Government decision-making.

Notes to Editors

This press notice applies to England

1. The Action Plan for Building Community Empowerment Success can be viewed at <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/communityempowerment/actionplan>

2. The action plan is a joint document between the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Local Government Association.

3. The eighteen authorities that will act as 'empowerment champions' are Lewisham, Southwark, Portsmouth, Brighton, Plymouth, Wiltshire, Ipswich, Great Yarmouth, Nottingham, High Peak, Sheffield, East Riding, Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Newcastle and North Tyneside, Cumbria and Salford.

4. The Citizenship Survey April - June 2007, England and Wales can be viewed at <http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/citizenshipsurveyaprjun2007>

CASE STUDIES

Sure Start - Ipswich

Five community forums in Ipswich have enabled local people to have a say on how their Sure Start programmes are run by getting ward councillors, staff and local people to meet and talk about the service. Parents and families have a say in how the childcare support service is planned and delivered through at board level through implementation groups and at parent forums.

Environmental issues are also being tackled through a panel created to co-ordinate and promote community environmental initiatives. Tasking' meetings are held at which issues concerning anti social behaviour and crime are brought up for discussion and a decision on what action needs to be taken.

Grey to Green - Great Yarmouth

Great Yarmouth has run a 'Grey to Green' initiative. This centres round a participatory programme called 'Blooming Good Ideas', which involves people and planners pooling ideas on how to make neighbourhoods cleaner, safer and greener.

Issued on behalf of the Department for Communities and Local Government by GNN East

Public Enquiries: 020 7944 4400;

News Releases: <http://www.communities.gov.uk> Client ref DCLG62/E/07

GNN ref 153134P