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## **‘STRONG LOCAL LEADERSHIP – QUALITY PUBLIC SERVICES’ - THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT WHITE PAPER**

### **1 SUMMARY**

- 1.1 This report brings to Members attention the key proposals in this White Paper, which sets out the Government's vision for Local Government. It also provides Officer commentary on implications for District Council of the main proposals as outlined.

### **2 INTRODUCTION**

- 2.2 The local Government White Paper was published by the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions in mid-December. It sets out the Government's thinking as to how Local Government should develop in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as part of its agenda for modernisation and reform. The White Paper is divided into two parts, with the first setting out the Government's main principles in relation to Public Sector performance and delivery. The second part focuses on changes to the Local Government finance regime, and follows on from the Local Government Finance Green Paper published in September 2000.

### **3 DETAILED CONSIDERATIONS**

- 3.1 In the foreword to the White Paper, the Prime Minister says that through it, he is attempting to seek the establishment of a partnership between Central and Local Government, reflecting the critical importance of Local Authorities as a tier of Democratic Government, delivering high quality public services to local people. He restates the Government's four principles for Public Sector Reform – a national framework of standards and accountability; within that framework; devolution to Local Councils to encourage diversity and creativity, giving them freedom to respond to and meet the communities' needs; building local capacity in recognition of the need for flexibility at the front line; and more choice for the customer, with access to an alternative supplier where performance is below acceptable standards.
- 3.2 A copy of the White Paper, and summaries of its main contents by the Local Government Association and also the IDEA have been placed in the Members Room for information.
- 3.3 Key elements of particular importance to the District Council are contained in the appendix to this report.

**4 OFFICER COMMENT**

- 4.1 Much of the White Paper is to be welcomed in that it represents a recognition by Central Government of the role that Local Government does play in delivering key public services. It also promises a move towards greater financial freedom for Local Authorities, although such a change comes with qualifications.
- 4.2 Whilst the White Paper makes reference to the role of District Councils, through its tone and content it appears that the Paper is largely written for an upper tier and unitary authority audience. The 4 key priority areas listed – education, health, crime and transport – impact more on these type of authorities, although District Councils do have a role to play.
- 4.3 The White Paper states that the Audit Commission have found that whilst some District Councils deliver very good services, their size and resource base mitigates against their capacity to improve and innovate. Thus, the introduction of 'league' tables, together with the definitions around 'capacity', suggest that the majority of District Councils are likely to find themselves in the 'coasting' or 'poor performing' categories.
- 4.4 The White Paper emphasises that District Councils should not work in isolation. In particular, they need to work in partnership with others – collaboration with the County Council is emphasised, particularly in connection with the development and implementation of local Public Service Agreements.
- 4.5 The promised rationalisation of the strategic agenda is to be welcomed, although the overall scope and framework for that is as yet largely unspecified. It will too, be replaced by other rigours, around inspection, peer review and performance measurement.
- 4.6 In many of the above areas, the District Council is already well placed to respond. However, there are issues around capacity building, partnership working, corporate governance, and peer review which this Council will need to consider in greater detail to determine the way forward. It is suggested that this task be given to the new Finance & General Purposes Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

**5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 The implications of the White Paper will impact upon both Member and officer resources and some of the matters raised are likely, if they come to fruition, to have financial implications. At the same time, other issues may well result in savings to the Authority.

**6      LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1    Much of the content of the White Paper will require primary legislation.

**7      PARISH IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1    The White Paper contains specific proposals in relation to Town and Parish Councils.

**8      RECOMMENDATION**

- 8.1    That Members consider the implications of the Government White Paper and refer its detailed examination to the Finance & Procedures Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

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**Background Papers:**

Government White Paper

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