

independence, opportunity, trust an agenda for local communities

a consultation paper



*Our vision for 2014 is of
self-governing communities in every
part of England and Wales...*

local communities in 2014

Our vision for 2014 is of self-governing communities in every part of England and Wales; sustainable communities that are prosperous, healthy and cohesive, but, just as importantly, different from each other; communities that draw strength from their distinctive identity and contribution to our national economy, culture and political life.

We use 'community' in a broad sense, to refer to small and larger areas, from villages and neighbourhoods to cities and counties. What they have in common are citizens who share more than a postcode, who have a common

sense of ownership and pride in the place where they live or work. They feel connected to the community because of its distinctive history and heritage or because it is a place which they have helped to shape and for whose success they can share the credit.

These are communities with thriving local economies, good transport links, a better and more sustainable local environment, less crime and anti-social behaviour, where people are better educated and in better health, and where children and older people enjoy a better quality of life.



an agenda for local communities



These benefits have not been delivered through targets dictated by Whitehall, but by local people themselves, with and through local representatives, setting local priorities and contributing to meeting them.

They are communities which are **independent** in two senses: that they can govern themselves free from outside interference in matters that are best left to local decision; and that because local services are financed primarily from local taxes and charges, they are much less dependent on financial help from national government.

Government in Westminster and Cardiff plays a more strategic and focused role. It does not claim to know better than local communities what is best for them, but seeks to ensure the conditions under which communities can thrive, in order to improve **opportunity** - everywhere. It provides the national framework to underpin sustainable development, but leaves local communities to govern themselves. It promotes the well-being of local communities much less by direct action, much more by ensuring the quality and performance of local democracy and local services; ensuring the achievement of minimum

standards, but not stifling local ambition or achievement.

The third element of **our vision** is **trust**: trust in each other and trust in government. Communities are confident of living free from the fear of crime and anti-social behaviour, and there is greater trust not only between neighbours, generations and ethnic communities, but also tolerance of diversity. Communities have a greater say in local matters, and in return have greater trust in local politicians and local councils. The partnership between local government and national government in Westminster and Cardiff is one of equality and mutual trust.



The strongest argument for devolving power from the centre is effective and democratic local councils showing how to mobilise local people and share power and responsibility with them...

a challenge for local leaders

Vision or fantasy? Sceptics will say that national government will never relinquish power to local councils, strong communities are an anachronism in a consumer society or that most citizens show little interest in civic participation. On the other hand the vision we have described is no more nor less than the aspiration of hundreds of local election manifestos and community strategies adopted in consultation with local people across the country.

Scepticism can be healthy, but not if it is used as an excuse for inaction.

The strongest argument for devolving power from the centre is effective and democratic local

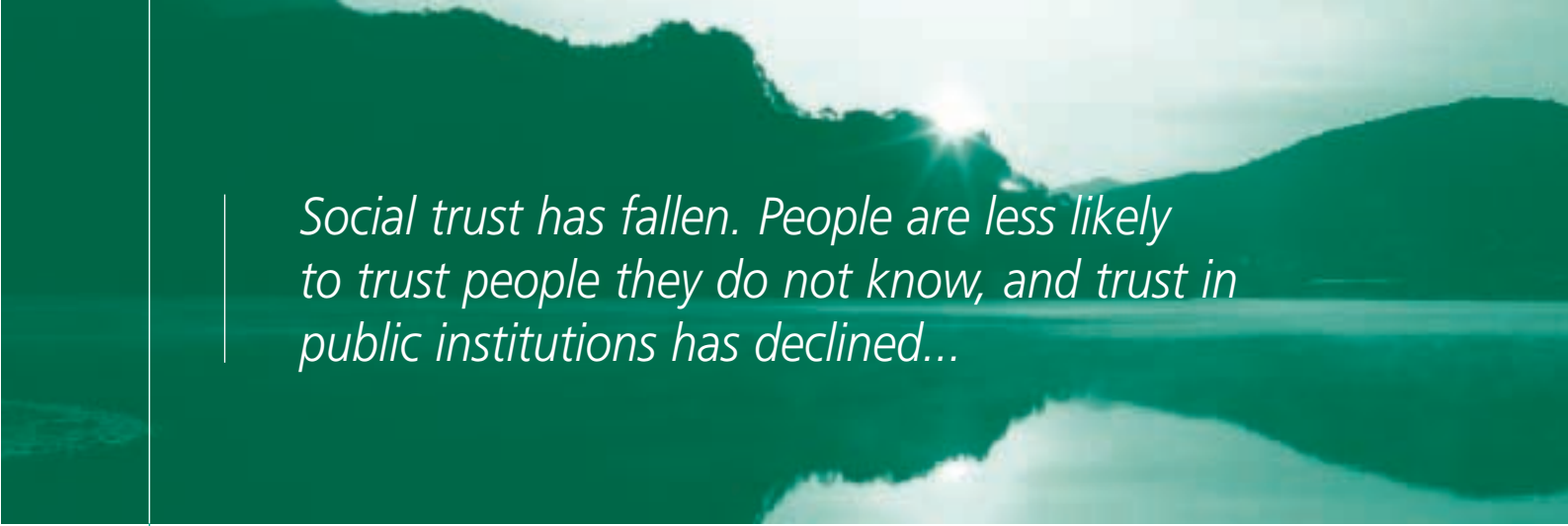
councils showing how to mobilise local people and share power and responsibility with them.

Waiting to see whether the next government will legislate to revitalise local democracy is not an option. No government can legislate for active citizens, stronger communities or revitalised local democracy. These are ambitions that can only be achieved through painstaking local action, area by area. The challenge in these pages is as much for local as for national leaders.

Do we have the ambition and determination to show the way forward?

an agenda for local communities





Social trust has fallen. People are less likely to trust people they do not know, and trust in public institutions has declined...

key challenges

The majority of Britain is better educated, **better housed and better-off than ever before**; most people can expect to live longer, healthier lives than their parents. But there are major challenges ahead.

Prosperity is unevenly distributed. Britain benefits from high levels of employment, but inequality in incomes has grown over the last two decades, and the disparity in regional prosperity is unparalleled in Europe. The effects are not only felt in the lagging regions; congestion, labour shortages and development pressure are major problems in parts of the south and east.

The population is ageing and more people live alone. The shortage of affordable housing is particularly acute in the more prosperous regions. Dispersed poverty is a problem, particularly in rural areas, but there are particular concentrations of poverty in some inner-city neighbourhoods and outer estates. Low income correlates with worse health, a shorter life-expectancy, a poor local environment and a higher risk of suffering crime or anti-social behaviour; and the children of poorer parents fare worse in school.




High levels of congestion in many places, coupled with inadequate public transport, threaten both economic vitality and the environment. Reduction of waste and carbon emissions remains a major challenge.

Society has become more diverse - both ethnically and culturally - and divided. People are less likely to live with or near their relatives. Although the incidence of divorce has levelled-off, more children grow up with parents living apart and, compared with the rest of Europe, Britain has a particularly high rate of teenage pregnancy. Promotion of healthier living has cut rates of heart disease and strokes, but predominantly among the middle classes.

Obesity, smoking and drug abuse are the most important health challenges ahead.

Social trust has fallen. People are less likely to trust people they do not know, and trust in public institutions has declined. People still tend to trust professionals, particularly those they come into regular contact with, but trust in public institutions and, in particular, politicians, has fallen significantly. One indicator is the fact that crime has fallen steadily since 1997, but two people out of three believe the opposite, not trusting the official statistics.





A continuing drive for better public services is crucial, but the agenda for the next decade is wider...

not just better public services

The government has put public service improvement at the head of its domestic agenda, and rightly so. Spending on favoured services has been increased significantly, and, on some indicators, services have improved, though unevenly. Further improvement is needed, but, with less scope for further tax increases, the emphasis has now to be on greater efficiency. The service improvement agenda emphasises better quality, local responsiveness and greater user choice. The efficiency agenda includes standardisation and joint purchasing by public bodies to reap economies of scale. The challenge is to combine both.

A continuing drive for better public services is crucial, but the agenda for the next decade is wider. If our ambition is prosperous, cohesive, healthy and sustainable communities throughout Britain, better public services are only part of the answer. Some services - education is the obvious example - are primarily an investment in the future well-being of communities, but others are there at least partly to respond to the urgent symptoms of social ills. We need a better health service, more effective policing and child protection, but our ambition is also to promote better parenting, healthier lifestyles and safer and stronger communities, to limit the need for



people to rely on these services. Equally, we have to reduce waste, rather than just recycle it.

The challenge to governments - central and local - is to sustain investment in the future well-being of communities despite urgent pressures to spend on improving services.

National challenges manifest themselves as local problems that do not neatly fit within service boundaries. Treatment of illness may be the province of doctors and nurses, but healthy communities require contributions from a wider range of people and organisations; community safety is not a matter just for the police. Problems are interconnected. Solutions require

co-ordination of local action. These are obvious points, but responding has been painfully hard, because it means getting organisations with very different cultures, working to different, sometimes incompatible, national priorities, to work together.

Community strategies and local strategic partnerships (LSPs) have emerged as the vehicle for local co-ordination, but they are not yet fully fit for purpose. Greater accountability to local people and the capacity to deploy resources across service boundaries and co-ordinate action to a shared agenda are both needed.

an agenda for local communities





In our vision, communities are self-governing first, and successful and sustainable as a consequence...

revitalising local democracy

Revitalised local democracy is not an optional extra, but an essential part of the agenda.

In our vision, communities are self-governing first and successful and sustainable as a consequence. That is because the challenges ahead cannot be solved for the people by politicians or professionals alone, but demand the active participation of the people affected. Only citizens can say whether policies are working for them.

Another part of the agenda is that people need to change their behaviour: to take better care of themselves, their families, their neighbours and their environment. But we can no longer expect

today's citizens to change their behaviour because the government or someone else in authority tells them to; they are much more likely to respect a decision reached through a democratic process in which they have had the opportunity to participate. And participation can be much more meaningful if it is local.

Local experience may suggest that the public do not often press for greater involvement except when they see things going wrong. But the fact is that too much of what currently passes for community involvement is unproductive and unrewarding for the citizens who get involved,

because they are offered either too little involvement or too much. Too often councils and other public bodies consult but do not act on the information they get or do not report back and explain their decisions; they seem not to be listening. Alternatively, activists who step forward are often dragged into a seemingly endless round of meetings, pointless ritual and bureaucracy. Small wonder there are too few volunteers. People want a greater say in local governance, but they want it on their own terms.

Part of the problem is that too little power is devolved to councils and other local public bodies to enable them to respond effectively to community views; another part is that some local leaders lack the will or the skills to share power, or to engage with communities on their own terms. But it is a mistake to see effective representation and wider participation as being in conflict. In fact they strengthen each other.

Devolution of power from central government should not stop at the town hall door. Whatever their feelings for their town, city or county, most people care most about their immediate neighbourhood, and, rightly, expect more of a say in what happens in it.

The government has recently trailed the idea of a neighbourhood tier of governance in other areas. While there is a strong case for bringing government closer to the people, it would be foolish to progress this idea without evaluating the strengths of what already exists in the form of parish, town and community councils and area committees or their equivalent. And wrong to focus on structural reform when it is not the process but the outcome - enabling communities to have more say in shaping their own futures - that matters.

Devolution should not stop at the town hall door, but it must not by-pass it either. Neighbourhoods are not self-contained; the solutions of many of their problems lie outside their areas. The ability of communities to influence what happens in the wider locality - district, city or county - is just as important as powers over what happens on their patch. So councils need to be free to respond to local priorities, not restricted by national targets and earmarked funding streams.



And one of the most important freedoms is control over resources.

Current arrangements for local government finance weaken local accountability because there is little relationship between service quality and local taxes as three-quarters of council finance comes in the form of government grant. National policies and the vagaries of grant distribution trump local choices in budget-setting. Local taxation must be reformed to increase the share of council income under local control, with government grant confined to compensating for variations in local needs and resources. The current review of the balance of funding makes clear that it will not be easy to reach a consensus on the way forward. But it is equally clear that no change is not an option.

Council services are not the only local public services, and not the only local bodies with tax-raising powers. One of the challenges that remains to be met is making effective arrangements for overseeing the totality of local public expenditure, the overall level of local taxation and how resources are to be deployed across services and priorities.

Central government's role should be slimmed down and more strategic. It should focus on ensuring that every council and community has the **opportunity** to find its own path to success. This means doing more on some issues, for example, more effective action to redress regional disparity; but less on others. National targets should be much fewer and limited to setting minimum standards of service and local democracy; backed up by an approach based on building the capacity of local communities to govern themselves effectively. Inspection and regulation should be slimmed down, consistent with this approach. This would pave the way to a new central-local relationship, based on government respect for the **independence** of local communities and their right to make their own choices, and a much greater degree of **trust** between national and local governments and the communities they both serve.

winning the argument

For many years, centralisation has been the default option for national governments confronted with a problem in local government. And the national media work overtime to reinforce the myth that national governments are responsible for everything. It is easy to be sceptical about the possibility that ministers and civil servants will never willingly give up power. Yet leading voices in government readily admit the centre cannot do everything and pronounce their commitment to localism.

In the run-up to the general election, the political parties could end up competing over who is most committed to devolving power; and the current review of council funding illustrates the government's acceptance that current arrangements for local taxation have major shortcomings.

A significant number of councils are among the best public service organisations in the country, as confirmed by the Audit Commission, which has kite-marked the majority of those assessed to date as good or excellent, and shows nearly all the rest to be improving. The assessments show

that very few councils lack the ambition or ideas to tackle local problems and secure dramatic improvements in local services or well-being, even though some need help to develop their capacity to turn ambition into delivery.

The infrastructure for local co-ordination is already in place in the form of local strategic partnerships. Four out of five urban councils operate area forums or committees for consultation or devolved decision-making. In many places, town, parish or community councils play a parallel role. None of these as yet fulfil their full potential, but they provide a solid base that can be built on. Given the safety net provided by its extensive powers to intervene if things go seriously wrong, government has no excuses for a reluctance to let go of power.

There has never been a better opportunity for radical reform and devolution. But local government needs to put beyond doubt the fact that it is ready and willing to rise to the challenge.



we don't have all the answers

This is not a draft manifesto. Our focus is not on what government should do in communities.

Rather, we want the political parties to think about what government could do to help local communities govern themselves.

Our vision is a long-term one. But if we are to deliver it, and secure truly empowered local governance, there are a number of important steps that could be taken by government after the forthcoming election.

Those steps include:

- a new approach to improving public services. We want to see a continued drive for increased efficiency combined with more ability for local people to influence the shape and scope of the services provided locally;
- an unambiguous re-assertion of the importance of the local politics. We should explore new opportunities for councillors to represent the people who elect them on local bodies and service providers;
- a new process for expenditure planning and target-setting in Whitehall which genuinely takes account of local priorities and pressures;
- reformed business planning in government agencies and local public bodies which is fully integrated with the local community strategy and local public service agreement;

- a new relationship between councils and government based on single pot funding and PSA-type agreements which reflect the different priorities in each locality;
- a new way of funding local services, with at least 75 per cent of councils' income being raised locally;
- a streamlined approach to inspecting local services which is more integrated, risk-based and focuses on the delivery of local priorities; and
- a commitment to working with local councils to promote genuine devolution beyond the town hall and a new relationship between councils and local institutions and organisations.

Over the next three months we aim to promote discussion across local government and with national government and local and national partners about the vision and proposed direction of travel, and more intensive debates on the key issues above.

We are particularly keen for member authorities to contribute evidence from local experience that can be used to ensure that policy development does not rely only on the limited information currently held in the Westminster village.

We are planning a wider programme of consultation, details of which are on our website at **www.lga.gov.uk**.

We plan to draw the threads of the discussion together by publishing firmer proposals for the next five years in September 2004.





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This consultation paper is published by the Local Government Association (LGA) to help develop a new agenda for local communities for the next parliament and beyond.

Comments are requested on any part of this consultation paper and particularly on the key issues highlighted. Written comments

are requested, preferably by e-mail, by 30th June 2004, and should be sent to **local.agenda@lga.gov.uk**

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promoting better local government

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