Community Cohesion - Decisions and Actions Required

Decisions

1.   This paper sets out the key themes from the interim statement by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion, together with an LGA work programme for activity in this area. Board views are sought, as follows:

       a.   general responses from a Member perspective on the key themes emerging from the interim statement;

       b.   specific Safer Communities points of interest in community cohesion work (particularly around place-shaping, tackling crime and the fear of crime, and promotion of civic values);

       c.   the scope of the proposed LGA work programme and relative priorities of the elements it covers.

Actions Required

2.   LGA policy staff to reflect on Board input for the next round of Commission input (for May) and in refining the forward work programme.

Action by: LGA Officers

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Community Cohesion

Summary

1.   On 21 February 2007, the Commission on Integration and Cohesion launched an interim statement to present headline themes emerging from its public consultation process. This paper sets out the Local Government Association's views on the interim statement and invites comment on a proposed work programme in this area (both to support the next stage of the Commission's work and more broadly).

Background

2.   The Commission on Integration and Cohesion has been tasked to consider how local areas can make the most of the benefits delivered by increasing diversity, but will also consider how they can respond to the tensions it can sometimes cause. It will develop practical approaches that build communities' own capacity to prevent problems, including those caused by segregation and the dissemination of extremist ideologies. It is chaired by Darra Singh, Chief Executive of Ealing Council and is due to make its final report to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in June 2007.

3.   The interim statement is a short summary of the Commission's thinking so far. It signposts areas that it will consider in more detail in its final report and encapsulates views expressed during initial consultation. As well as visits to local communities and discussions with researchers and practitioners working on integration and cohesion related projects, it received over 600 responses to its consultation paper. These included a good range of responses from councils plus capping pieces from the LGA and from IDeA. A summary of the interim statement can be found attached at Annex A.

4.   From an LGA perspective, there is a good match between the themes emerging from the interim statement and our own input to the Commission to date. In particular, the following areas are worth highlighting:

- the focus on local authorities as place shapers. By working with local partners, influencing local services and making things happen, local authorities can embed community cohesion principles throughout local life and bring about real change to the lives of people living in their areas. The interim report also expresses the importance of tackling wider issues (around a competition for shared resources) in order to ensure a healthy society in which integration and cohesion can flourish. These include, for example: reducing inequalities (especially in terms of access to education, training and employment); good quality public services; improving community safety; and improving local areas' built environment to provide mixed housing tenure and increased public space.

- the importance of all parts of society feeling represented in the political process. Councils (and political parties) have a role here in helping to encourage candidates from under-represented groups (including women, younger people

and disabled people as well as BME groups). The LGA will be engaging in Government-led work to identify barriers to increasing the numbers of councillors from black and ethnic minority groups. We will also look to build on our Local Democracy Campaign to encourage greater diversity amongst elected members.

- the opportunity for local government to foster a local debate on shared values. In our initial input to the Commission, we saw this as having an emphasis on citizenship and a focus on a shared set of civic values built up from the local level, setting out the roles, responsibilities and rights of citizens and of the local authorities (and other partners) that represent and serve them. From a citizen perspective, these values need to encapsulate what individuals are expected to contribute to their communities, as well as what they can expect in return.

- the need for councils (and partners) to be better equipped to understand and explain how resources should be allocated at the local level between different groups. More needs to be done here, for example on timely and accurate population data. This goes hand in hand with the need to dispel myths about favouritism towards particular sectors of our society. We will work with our members to address these issues; and a first 'myth-busting seminar' for communications staffs is taking place this month.

- the importance of English-language training (in preference to translation).

- and, finally, from a Safer Communities perspective, the impact that crime and fear of crime have on integration and cohesion. The Commission has highlighted how fear of crime makes people less likely to approach their neighbours, and that even low level crime has an impact on how they feel about their public spaces. In its follow-up work, it wants to think more about particular types of crime and their relationship with integration and cohesion. (The Commission has not said a great deal about work to tackle violent extremism; this is being handled separately – the Programme Director can give an oral update at the Board meeting if Members so wish.)

5.   It would be useful to get initial reactions from Board Members to the themes in the interim report. We will be producing a follow-up input to the Commission for consideration by a range of interested Boards in the May round of meetings.

LGA Community Cohesion work programme

6.   The attached work programme (Annex B) builds on a broader aim or medium-term goal for the LGA which is 'to promote the role of local authorities in building and maintaining cohesive communities, and to provide appropriate advice and guidance to support them in this role'. Working in close co-ordination with IDeA, it covers the following key areas:

a.   high quality and timely input into the Commission and influencing its recommendations towards support for local authorities in building cohesive communities. Much of this is well underway, but there is more to do. We will ensure that information gathered during a cohesion and integration conference we are organising in April is fed through to the Commission. We will also support the Commission with dissemination of its final report.

b.   high quality and timely input into central government policy development on community cohesion, social exclusion and racial equality. We will forge relationships with officials at DCLG's Race Cohesion and Faiths Directorate and other departments working on relevant new policy and support political leadership by LGA to gain Ministerial support for a direction of travel in policy towards supporting local authorities' roles in building cohesive communities.

c.   developing cross-sector links to help the central government, private and third sectors understand the importance of working with local authorities to build cohesion and integration and to reduce extremism. We feel that this will be particularly timely when the Commission's final report has been published. We are interested in exploring how all sectors of communities can work together to foster cohesion and integration.

d.   developing new resources to support local authorities on 'the role of members in enhancing community cohesion' and 'myth busting and how to handle the media', and will refresh a current resource on 'how local authorities can best engage with faith groups'.

We will also 'mainstream' this work by checking that all of the LGA's work is consistent with good practice in building cohesive communities and ensure that it aligns with related work streams within the 'central family'.

Implications for Wales

7.   There are no specific implications for Wales. There may be scope for constructive dialogue with WLGA and Welsh Assembly contacts.

Financial/Resource Implications

8.   It has been possible to dedicate some limited policy consultant resource to this work. But guidance on priorities for what is in theory an extensive work programme would be welcome.

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