

## **Establishing an LGA position on role of communities and the voluntary sector in local decision making and service delivery**

### **Purpose of report**

For direction.

### **Summary**

This report sets out the background and reasoning behind the proposal to develop an LGA position around the role of communities and the voluntary sector in local decision making and service delivery. It seeks a steer from members of the Safer Strong Communities Board on what this position should include.

### **Recommendation**

It is recommended that the Board set out what should be included in LGA policy to steer our response to Government's proposals for a greater role for communities and the voluntary sector in local decision-making and service delivery.

### **Actions**

1. Officers will use the discussion to finalise a draft set of positions statements for final sign off by the LGA.
2. These positions statements will be used in our engagement with government departments in the development of this cross-cutting area of work.

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## **Establishing an LGA position on role of communities and the voluntary sector in local decision making and service delivery**

### **Background**

1. In August 2018, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) published their Civil Society Strategy, whose purpose is described as setting out how “the government will work to support and to strengthen civil society, without compromising its independence”. The Strategy specifically refers to civil society helping tackle “poverty, obesity, mental ill-health, youth disengagement, reoffending, homelessness, isolation, and loneliness, and the challenges of community integration”.
2. In addition to an ‘Innovation in Democracy’ programme, where councils can bid for funding to set up a local community participatory project to make a decision on significant local issues (whereby they commit to honouring the decision), government is supporting the spread of ‘Citizen Commissioners’ – local people supported to make commissioning decisions on behalf of their communities.
3. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) is now developing a ‘Communities Framework’ along similar lines to the Civil Society Strategy, with James Brokenshire taking the ministerial lead as Secretary of State. MHCLG are currently asking key partners for evidence and will be undertaking a more thorough consultation in the spring.
4. Both DCMS and MHCLG are looking at:
  - 4.1. How to facilitate ‘communities’ having more control over local decision-making, focusing in particular on council decision-making.
  - 4.2. Whether there is a way to give communities more control and a delivery role in local issues and services, and local/national government less of a role.
  - 4.3. Redesigning the approach to the use of public spaces and buildings to be ‘inclusive spaces’.
5. The Cabinet Office has also initiated discussions with the LGA on the development of their work stream around local political engagement, and the development of resources to build democratic engagement capability among local authorities and civil society.

### **Issues**

6. Communities, democracy and the voluntary sector has been identified as a cross-cutting policy issue for the LGA. As such, there is no single LGA Board that includes the issue in its entirety within its work programme. Given that the Safer Stronger Communities Board

is leading on community cohesion, it is well-placed to discuss and make recommendations relating to an LGA policy position around community-led local decision-making and the role of communities in the delivery of council services. Other LGA Boards will also be invited to make recommendations in their areas of interest.

7. Senior civil servant discussions with LGA officers is making it apparent that the LGA needs to develop a 'position' around extra decision-making powers for communities and proposals for a greater role for community groups and the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in the delivery and ownership of local services.
8. Government appears to be particularly concerned by the on-going results of the [Community Life Survey](#), which states that only 26 per cent of respondents state that they are able to influence decisions affecting their local area, whilst 54 per cent said they would like to be more involved in the decisions their local council make which affect their local area.
9. Establishing an LGA position on the above issues will:
  - 9.1. Give structure and direction to how we influence MHCLG in the development of the framework.
  - 9.2. Frame our ongoing engagement with DCMS on the Civil Society Strategy and the Cabinet Office on their new democratic engagement programme.
  - 9.3. Help the LGA in responding to any developments on behalf of the sector.
  - 9.4. Help us prepare councils for any opportunities or challenges ahead.
10. **Members of the Board are asked to give direction on what the LGA should include in any statement or response regarding the role of the community and voluntary sector and community democratic engagement.**
11. Possible areas for discussion include:
  - 11.1. How the democratic mandate of councillors works alongside citizen involvement in decision-making.
  - 11.2. The difficult decisions councils have to make, and accountability for their actions and decisions through the ballot box.
  - 11.3. The importance of voting and engagement in local democratic processes to support that accountability.
  - 11.4. The resources needed to support the VCS.

- 11.5. The training councillors have and the support the LGA gives them to undertake their role.
- 11.6. The current relationship between councils and the VCS in delivering local services and in local issues, and whether a multi-agency approach is preferable, rather than a non-public sector approach.
- 12. In particular members of the Board are asked to give a steer on DCMS's and MHCLG's proposals in a community safety and policing context including:**
- 12.1. Reducing re-offending and the challenges of community integration. Is there a role for communities having more say in community safety, regulatory (licensing, trading standards, environmental health) and policing decisions?
- 12.2. Whether local communities should have a greater role in the delivery of local issues and services in the context of community cohesion and integration when this could have significant implications for how resources are used locally, with the potential for some communities to be excluded from the decision-making process (e.g. gypsies) and further disadvantaged?
- 12.3. Whether it would be desirable for the local community to be better able to direct policing resources? To what extent would this be desirable and what would be the implications?
- 12.4. How do we prevent capture of the process by the vocal minority who may not be representative of the local community at large and how would we give hard to reach groups a voice?
- 13. Below are a set of proposed position statements that the LGA could adopt that we hope will prompt discussion. Members of the Board are asked to discuss and direct officers on their tone and content, and discuss alternatives or additions.**
14. Fundamentally, we need a better democratic process, through the process of devolution, where local residents are more incentivised to get actively engaged in decision-making locally because councils have the genuine power to make decisions about their locality.
15. The LGA supports the enhancement of opportunities for democratic engagement, and in particular to encouraging all communities to register to vote and to vote in their local elections. Voting is a universal right in the UK, and it provides a universal opportunity for anyone who has come of age to engage in democracy.
16. Alongside the right to vote, is the opportunity to be voted for. Representing your local community as their elected councillor is a huge privilege and a great responsibility. As

their democratically elected local representatives, we make decisions that we believe are in the best interests of everyone in our local communities.

17. Good democratic decision-making needs local politicians who reflect the range of experiences, insights, connections and networks that exist in their local communities. We support the encouragement of individuals from all walks of life to become a councillor, and have our own [‘Be a councillor’](#) campaign that provides some of this support and encouragement.
18. Local government provides a framework for decisions that affect place and community to be made based on the view of locally elected individuals, who in turn are advised by their officers and members of their community. Local government strives for transparency and accountability in their decision making, and councils have to adhere to legislation to ensure this takes place. Local government also has structures in place regarding conduct and ethics. The LGA provides training and support to councillors to help them fulfil their role.
19. Whilst we believe that local government provides the best framework for important and difficult decisions to be made in a democratically accountable and transparent way, our communities and service users are ‘experts by experience’ and ‘experts of their local place’, and it is essential that councils are able to integrate them into their decision-making processes.
20. We support the work of the ‘Innovation in Democracy’ programme to explore participatory democracy and its role in enhancing local decision-making and ownership of outcomes by local people. We would like to see central government also exploring the role of participatory democracy in its national decision-making. We should not be seeking to educate people on where local government’s responsibility stops and national government’s starts, but we should be collectively addressing the issues important to our communities and acting on their proposed solutions.
21. Building the capacity of our communities to be active in local decision-making requires resourcing, leadership and trust. This includes central government trusting local government and handing back power so that decisions that affect local people can genuinely be made at the local level. Our communities will be stronger if they have ownership of local decisions, and can see that the decisions can be made rather than passing it between central and local government and different departments and agencies.
22. Councils have a long relationship with their local voluntary and community sector. The VCS is invaluable in enabling councils to support local people in need and to help shape and maintain our public places and spaces. These range from domestic abuse support to mental health support to managing parks, footpaths, museums and gardens to running libraries. The list goes on. Since 2010, councils have lost 60p in every pound they have

to spend. This has inevitably led to greater reliance on the VCS to deliver some services that councils would have previously delivered, and services that were valued by the community.

23. This has presented both opportunities and challenges. The VCS is not a 'free resource' and requires support, funding and capacity building; and in some areas there has not been the community capital to take on locally-valued services or public spaces. In some areas, the VCS has been able to step in. But if we are to look to the VCS to take on a further role in the support and delivery of essential local services and functions, then this will require resourcing in its own right. Restrictions around competitive tendering, grant giving, etc, have to be weighed against enabling the VCS to be supported and to flourish. The importance of value for money, transparency and accountability also needs to be considered.
24. Whilst the LGA supports the vital role of the VCS, and measures to build the capacity and capability of the VCS, we cannot lose sight of the imperative to adequately fund councils to enable them to honour their democratically elected commitments; deliver on their statutory duties; act as shapers of place; support those in their communities in need; create safe, strong and cohesive local communities; and be a focal point for communities. Councils need adequate funding to enable them to support the VCS to have a greater role in delivering local services. This should be about enhancing the opportunities for local people in need to be supported, and for local people to have a role in volunteering and supporting their neighbourhoods, creating that sense of local pride/sense of community/investment in their local area - not a cost-saving initiative.
25. It is a very different conversation with residents on their ownership and role in local services if it comes from a place of improvement, quality and skills, compared with the need to take on local services because of funding cuts.
26. Apart from policy statements, is there anything else the LGA should be considering?

### **Implications for Wales**

27. There are no specific implications for Wales as this is a devolved matter for the Welsh Assembly Government.

### **Financial Implications**

28. There are no financial implications arising from this report.

### **Next steps**

29. Officers will modify the proposed policy statements based on direction and discussion from the Board.
30. Officers will take forward any suggestions for this area of work.