

Commission, *Capacitybuilders* and sector leaders to explore the options for enabling charities and other sector organisations to better campaign on issues that are likely to advance the cause of the purposes for which they have been established. As part of this process, the Government will consider the recommendations of the recent report of the independent Advisory Group on Campaigning and the Voluntary Sector, chaired by Baroness Helena Kennedy QC (23 May 2007).

Local communities

169. Much of this paper focuses on how government and Parliament interact, and how power should be shared between them. But power should not just be devolved from the national government to the national Parliament: power must also rest with local communities. In the past individuals and communities have tended to be seen as passive recipients of services provided by the state. However, in recent years people have demonstrated that they are willing to take a more active role, and that this can help improve services and create stronger communities. The Government believes it must find new ways to enable people to become active citizens, empowered and fully engaged in local decision-making. The Government will enhance democracy by devolving more power directly to the people. It will consult on the following areas:

- extending the right of people to intervene with their elected representatives through community rights to call for action;
- duties to consult on major decisions through mechanisms such as citizens' juries;
- powers of redress to scrutinise and improve the delivery of local services; and
- powers to ballot on spending decisions.

170. *Strong and Prosperous Communities – The Local Government White Paper*, published last autumn set out a range of proposals for empowering local communities in England (see Box 4).⁵⁰ The new Community Call for Action enables local people to raise issues of concern in their area and demand a response from their local council. Issues raised might range from the quality of local youth services to a request for the transfer of a local asset into community ownership. The transfer of assets to community control creates a catalyst for active citizenship, as people come forward to run and direct a local facility or service. The evidence suggests that if people feel their efforts will be rewarded by real change in their communities, they will be willing to step forward.

⁵⁰ Following the consultation the Department for Communities and Local Government published a White Paper – *Strong and Prosperous Communities – The Local Government White Paper*, Cm 6939-I, London, The Stationery Office, October 2006.

173. In recent years the Government has introduced Local Area Agreements, which are individual agreements signed by central government with every local authority. They set out the priorities in the local area and how the local authority and other public service providers such as health and the police will respond to them. *The Strong and Prosperous Communities* paper
172. To ensure that citizens have the opportunity to express their needs and concerns to those who are providing public services, the White Paper set out the new duty that the Government is placing on local authorities in England to consult and involve local people in the major decisions which affect them. This means that local authorities must take the views of their communities into account and will make services more responsive to their needs.
171. Communities in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales also have measures to hold service providers to account. The Government will soon publish its Sub-National Review of Economic Development which will signal a shift of focus to local authorities, open up the possibility of powerful city regions and give a clearer role for the regions of England.

- Strong and Prosperous Communities – The Local Government White Paper,*
- sets out a range of proposals for devolving power to citizens and revitalising local democracy including:
 - giving people a new right to an answer from their local authorities when they demand action on any issue they want to raise through a new Community Call for Action;
 - increasing opportunities for communities to take on the management and ownership of local assets and facilities such as under-used community centres or empty schools;
 - simplifying and extending the scope of tenant management of housing;
 - encouraging local charters between communities and service providers which set out what local people can expect from their services and how they can take action if standards are not being met;
 - providing a new power of well-being for the best parish councils to improve the development and coordination of support for citizens, communities groups and local authorities; and
 - changing the "Best Value" Duty to ensure that authorities inform, consult, involve and devolve to all citizens and communities.

Box 4: Empowering local communities

- also set out how the Government will strengthen these agreements, ensuring that English local authorities have the flexibility to respond to the needs and priorities expressed by the community.
174. The *Strong and Prosperous Communities* paper was an important first step in setting out how the Government will empower local communities. Building on those proposals, the Government will also examine new ways in which to strengthen the ability of citizens to influence local decisions and hold service providers to account.
175. Petitions can provide an important way for local communities to express collectively their views about an issue and generate local debate. They can also improve the connection between residents and local authorities, especially when they are taken seriously by local authorities. However there is evidence that major petitions are often not fully analysed and responded to. Introducing a more formal petitioning system would provide another way to strengthen the ability of communities to have a legitimate voice in, and direct influence on, local authority decision-making. It would also help ensure that local authorities are aware of, and respond to, the issues, concerns and aspirations of most importance to local people. The Government is considering introducing a duty that requires local authorities to consider and investigate petitions from local communities, and guarantee petitioners and the wider community a response on the issues which have been raised.
176. Enabling communities to take decisions about how to use local funds can also help ensure that local priorities are being met. The Government will explore the possibility of a new provision for local communities to apply for devolved or delegated budgets to fund projects which will benefit the local community. These might range from the creation of a new park or playground to the provision of new services for the elderly.
177. To help make local services more accountable to local people, the Government will also work with local authorities and public service providers in England to ensure that there is widespread use of local real-time data. This will provide communities with regular and accessible information on their local services, helping citizens judge the effectiveness of those services and giving them evidence on the performance of service providers. In vital services which really affect peoples lives and the way that they feel about their local community, we must explore further opportunities for citizens to contribute to services in their area and ensure that services feel more accountable to them. The Government will look in particular to take further steps in policing and in health services.

178. The Government currently supports the recruitment of thousands of citizens to take on a wide range of lay governance and scrutiny roles (eg, school governors, health trust members and tenant representatives). Once recruited, however, they receive little support and there is no overall co-ordination of the contribution that they make. The Government will explore how citizens who have the potential and willingness to contribute to public decision making can be better encouraged and supported to realise that potential, in a much more systematic and cost effective way.
179. Creating a more participatory democracy requires a healthy representative democracy at local level. It also requires citizens to understand the roles of central and local government, and who can be held responsible for the decisions and services which affect their lives. The performance of local authorities, as measured through the Comprehensive Performance Assessment, has improved greatly in recent years. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will now work with the Local Government Association to establish a concordat to govern the relations between central and local government. This will establish for the first time an agreement on the rights and responsibilities of local government, including its responsibilities to provide effective leadership of the local area and to empower local communities where possible.