

Beyond Lancashire Locals?

1 Introduction

The County Council introduced a programme of locality working in 2001-02. This was aimed at making the Council more locally responsive, developing closer joint working and a better shared view of local priorities with the district councils and other local partners and enhancing the local representational role of local County Councillors.

As a new administration, we are examining all areas of existing County Council policy to ensure that it meets our priorities and the promises we made to the electorate. This includes a review of the Council's existing approach to locality working and localism.

2 Background

Undoubtedly, relationships between the County and district councils have improved considerably over the years. They have moved on particularly rapidly under new officer leadership at the County Council, and have also included better joint working with the two unitaries. The preparation of the MAAs and the establishment of the cluster-based Leaders' Boards have helped develop better understanding of shared priorities and the beginning of new ways of working. There is a shared focus emerging on the fundamental importance of economic development and the role the different tiers of local government can play alongside the private sector.

Similarly, the county-wide Lancashire Leaders Group is becoming better established and is developing into a forum where we can air potentially difficult issues and discuss shared priorities. Again, the need for collective action on stimulating the Lancashire economy and punching above our weight regionally and beyond is providing a major stimulus for joint working. Discussions around public realm and support for local children's trusts are strengthening the one to one relationships between the county and district councils. The "Team Lancashire" brand has helped engender a spirit of co-operative working and improve the reputation of Lancashire local government locally, regionally and nationally.

However, the financial climate means that the need for hard-edged joint working and collective tough decisions has never been greater. The public don't distinguish between the tiers of local government – nor should they have to. We all serve the same people and they have a right to expect us collectively to deliver high quality, locally focused and relevant services in the most efficient and effective way possible.

3 Establishing our principles for locality working and localism

As a new administration, we have sought to define our own principles for locality working and localism and now wish to ensure that we have mechanisms in place to help us deliver them. We have been very clear that we want to listen to and work with local people and communities. Everyone has a part to play and something to contribute to their community and we want to tap into and support that potential – empowering people to take responsibility for their own lives and make a contribution to the communities in which they live. We want to do that in as streamlined and efficient a way as possible, working with partners and stripping out unnecessary meetings and duplication.

Our priorities include:

- Developing a shared sense of direction and priorities with the District Councils
- Listening and responding to local communities and providing the services they need in a cost effective way
- Empowering local county councillors to take an active role in their communities
- Reducing bureaucracy and unnecessary meetings
- Helping to stimulate active and engaged town and parish councils

4 The Lancashire Locals

Lancashire Locals were developed as part of the County Council's overall locality programme. They were introduced on a pilot basis in 2004 and rolled out across the county in 2006.

They have had some successes eg brokering complex public consultation exercises and bringing local knowledge and public opinion to bear on some local highways issues – for example the work done via the Hyndburn Local to build a major new roundabout at Britannia Crossroads and the use of the £5 million additional funding we made available when we took control to deal with longstanding pot holes and other highway maintenance issues.

However, the Locals have also tended to slow down decision making – we have seen big delays recently in making decisions on things as relatively straightforward as disabled parking bays and in Clitheroe it has taken over two years to decide on a town centre parking issue. The Locals still focus almost exclusively on county council issues, with few district council issues on the table and few examples of innovative joint working emerging.

Furthermore, the Locals are a very expensive way of doing county-district business. They cost well over £100,000 in direct servicing costs alone, excluding all the officer and member time taken up in preparing reports and attending meetings. As an administration, we believe that the broader development of locality working and county-district relationships has been overshadowed by the time, energy and resource that has gone into the Lancashire Locals in recent years.

5 Measuring the Lancashire Locals against our priorities

How do the Locals measure up against our emerging priorities for locality working and localism set out in section 3 above?

Developing a shared sense of direction and priorities with Districts

- Not constituted or established to achieve proper strategic change
- In general, the focus is on very local, operational decisions
- Not a forum for big decisions that drive out efficiencies, establish shared services or move forward on strategic economic, social or environmental priorities

Listening and responding to local communities and providing the services they need in a cost effective way

- Some Locals have had some success in attracting the local community, but mainly around specific agenda items
- A committee format, with agendas, reports and debates, is not really a format that engages members of the community
- The Locals operate to a common scheme of delegation, so it is relatively difficult to "flex" for local priorities
- The Locals are making specific operational decisions, not looking at patterns of service provision, opportunities for rationalisation, efficiencies etc

Empowering local county councillors to take an active role in their communities

- Some local decision making, but tends to be very low level
- A very formal setting, often with little real community involvement
- Largely invisible, therefore not really engaging local county councillors directly with local communities in their divisions
- The Locals have provided an opportunity to bring local knowledge and expertise to bear and tapped into the potential of local member knowledge and contacts. But this has been for a relatively limited range of services and it is an expensive and inflexible way of doing it
- Local member grants have provided a useful tool for supporting very local community priorities, but the requirement to go through the Lancashire Locals can slow things down and be a barrier
- The Locals have improved elected member involvement with service areas that traditionally have engaged less with councillors (eg social

care), but there is often information overload and a lack of clarity as to how and where members can influence these services

Reducing bureaucracy and unnecessary meetings

- As outlined above, the Locals are expensive to administer and consume a lot of officer and member time. Many of them also have a number of sub-committees and working groups which adds to the costs
- There are lots of other groups and meetings operating on district and sub-district footprints – LSPs, Children's Trusts, CDRPs
- There are lots of other ways to engage with the public via existing mechanisms – eg district area forums, boards, PACT meetings

Helping to stimulate active and engaged town and parish councils

- The relationship between the Lancashire Locals and town and parish councils has always been unclear and, on occasions, a source of tension. There are more effective ways of improving our engagement with parish and town councils, for example, by how we support parish plans and through delivering our commitments in the Parish Charter

6 Moving Forward

We do not feel that the Lancashire Locals reflect our priorities as an administration for relationships with the other tiers of local government or with local communities. We are minded to abolish them with effect from 31 March 2010. It is our belief that abolishing the Locals would generate cash savings and free up time and energy to reinvest in new priorities for locality working and localism.

We will explore opportunities for strengthening relationships and developing real joint working by some re-investment in stimulating existing and new structures of joint community engagement and enhancing the funding available to local county councillors.

We want to redefine our engagement with district and town and parish councils and also the role of and support to local county councillors. Our initial thinking is set out below.

7 Strengthening the relationship between County and District leadership

The Lancashire Leaders group and the newly established MAA Leaders Boards are beginning to strengthen the levels of trust and co-operation between the various leaderships and to lead to a better focus on shared priorities. Lancashire Locals add nothing to this concept and could potentially hinder its development.

Focused Leader to Leader discussions are key to relationship building and defining priorities. Lancashire Locals were never really designed for this

purpose. Building trust and co-operation at Leader level is essential if we are to change policy and move resources.

Therefore, we should build on direct Leader-Leader/Cabinet-Cabinet relationships.

Options (not mutually exclusive) include:

- Direct Leader-to-Leader meetings as now
- Joint meetings between LCC Cabinet and individual DC Cabinets
- Joint meetings between individual LCC Cabinet members and relevant DC Cabinet members
- Cabinet members to have a "champion" relationship for individual districts

As a Council, we will take a more proactive approach to this relationship, rather than acting as passive responders as tended to happen in the past. We will take a clearer view of LCC's desired outcomes and priorities and seek to reach a shared set of priorities for each district. Areas for exploration include:

- Delivering the shared aspirations in the MAAs, LAA, Ambition Lancashire and district community strategies
- Opportunities for building a stronger and more resilient economy – locally, within the clusters and pan-Lancashire
- Opportunities for shared back office services and efficiencies
- Opportunities for better linkages between front line services, leading to improved citizen experiences (eg trading standards and environmental health, social services and housing)
- Joint locality plans
- Joint public realm strategies
- Joint approaches to voluntary sector funding
- Joint approaches to community engagement and local "problem solving"

We would expect this to be a two-way process though. As a general rule, our discussions – whether individually, on a cluster basis or Lancashire-wide - should be on a "something for something" basis.

We would put mechanisms in place to consult local county councillors on key local issues to ensure that our responses are locally responsive and reflect local views.

8 Devolution to District Councils

We also wish to explore the potential for some services, decisions and budgets to be devolved to district councils where decisions are most sensibly taken locally. Several of the services and decisions that currently go through Lancashire Locals would be amenable to this approach. The development of

the new approach to the public realm will offer significant opportunities for improved joint service outcomes as well as efficiency and effectiveness improvements going forward.

Where sensible, we also want to explore using existing area forum and similar structures for further devolved local decision making.

9 Empowering local county councillors to take an active role in their communities

Local county councillors have a key role to play in reinvigorating local democracy. They have a wealth of local knowledge and contacts that we need to tap into and use to inform decisions and policy direction. They need access to timely, high quality information about County Council activities in their division and mechanisms to feed back local views and concerns.

This too needs to be done in a non-bureaucratic way which stimulates local councillors to be proactive in their communities. Technology will have much to offer.

Options include:

- Reinforcing the "councillor first" protocol with officers across the County Council
- Radically re-shaping the councillor portal on the intranet
- Seeking local councillors' views electronically on issues affecting their division and/or on wider district priorities
- Defining more clearly the role of local county councillors as LCC's representatives on local bodies eg CDRPs, PACTs etc
- Negotiating with district councils and other partners to secure full local county councillor involvement in existing community engagement mechanisms eg area boards and committees, PACTs etc.
- Enhancing local member grants to give local members more autonomy and accountability for their decisions

10 Conclusion

Effective relationships with the other tiers of local government remain key to our approach to localism. However, we believe that the mechanisms for achieving this need an overhaul. The abolition of the Lancashire Locals would generate significant financial savings and would free up time and energy to develop new approaches. We would further strengthen relationships at leadership level to make step changes in determining and implementing shared priorities, devolve those decisions, services and budgets most sensibly decided locally to the district councils and strengthen the role of County Councillors in representing their local constituents.

Geoff Driver, Leader, Lancashire County Council

Summary

The "offer" to the district councils

- Improved access to key decision makers
- More focused discussions around shared priorities, shared services etc
- Direct delegation of decisions/budgets (within an LCC policy framework)
- Bespoke public realm arrangements
- Efficiencies in the use of member and (for some) officer time
- Opportunities to agree joint approaches to community engagement, consultation etc

The "offer" to local county councillors

- Improved local information
- Consultation on key issues affecting their division
- Continued support from DPOs, particularly where issues cut across departments/partners and members can't resolve them themselves
- Directly delegated budgets without Lancashire Locals acting as a filter
- An overt recognition of the role of the local county councillor in division-based meetings
- An opportunity for a higher profile in the local area
- More productive use of time

The "offer" to the public

- More efficient use of public resources
- The three tiers working more effectively together, and with other agencies
- A less confusing "landscape" through which to raise local issues
- A clearer role for their local county councillor

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