

meeting County Council

date 22nd July 2010

agenda item number

7a ii.

REPORT OF THE DEPUTY LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Localism and Decentralisation Agenda

1. This subject inevitably dominated both the Nottinghamshire Strategic Partnership meeting held at the John Fretwell Centre, Warsop, on 25th June and the Local Government Group Assembly (aka the LGA Conference) held in Bournemouth from 7th to 9th July.
2. In common with many other partnerships, the Nottinghamshire Strategic Partnership has been criticised for being more concerned with process than delivery. This was answered at the Strategic Partnership meeting, perhaps somewhat belatedly, by the inclusion in the morning's programme of a number of presentations by individuals who had benefited from partnership initiatives. The open forum at the end of the meeting was dominated by thoughtful contributions from local authority, NHS and voluntary sector representatives about how the localism agenda could be made to work for the benefit of the people of Nottinghamshire.
3. For thirty years I have railed against the centralisation of power in Whitehall, its micromanagement of services, the remorseless marginalisation of local government by Conservative and Labour administrations alike, the substantial loss of any effective say for local communities over issues that concern them and the consequent increasingly dangerous alienation of much of the electorate from the entire democratic process. The speed and vigour with which the Coalition Government is pursuing the decentralising agenda is, therefore, both stunning and exhilarating.
4. That is the good news. The bad news is that the powers and responsibilities that should never have been removed will only be restored with substantially reduced resources. The death-bed conversion of Westminster politicians to decentralisation has been so sudden and dramatic that it is hard to escape the conclusion that it would not have occurred but for the extreme gravity of the economic situation and the urgent necessity to share the burden of painful decisions as widely as possible.

5. Against this background the LGA Conference was unusually interesting, even exciting. The ministerial team from the Department of Communities and Local Government gave generously of their time to large and small gatherings alike. It may have taken a crisis to bring the British version of 'democratic centralism' to an end, but it is now recognised that it has been as great a failure as its counterpart in Eastern Europe up to 1989. As common sense and local initiative reassert themselves, there is a real prospect that over time, local government service will become more worthwhile and rewarding. In the short term there will be a challenging process of adjustment.
6. An early test will come in the area of economic regeneration, with the disappearance of artificial and bureaucratic regional structures and their replacement by more practical, business-led, sub-regional Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs), especially as proposals are sought by 6th September. Old habits die hard and ministers were repeatedly asked when they would be issuing guidelines. The answer was that there would be no guidelines, just a test of reasonableness to be satisfied by the local economic community, demonstrating that the area proposed for a LEP made economic sense and would work.

Face to face customer access

7. At previous meetings members have been informed of the proposals to retain face to face customer access and distribute this more equitably throughout the County. This interim model involves a localised approach including retention of some services; delivery of face to face contact from District Council premises and County Council libraries in other districts and in some areas directly commissioned from and delivered by the District Council on behalf of the County Council.
8. The services provided are as follows:
 - Ashfield** - services are continuing from their existing location in Sutton with a weekly outreach surgery in Hucknall.
 - Bassetlaw** - service provision has been rationalised and is working well.
 - Broxtowe** – a new face to face service is being planned for Beeston library and probably Eastwood Library to be fully operational by September at the latest.
 - Gedling** – service provision continues from existing premises at the Civic Centre with a weekly outreach surgery at Netherfield.
 - Mansfield** – services are being provided from Mansfield Library.
 - Mobile Unit** - this continues to operate and customers can access the rota from the website or via the Customer Service Centre.
 - Newark** – a new face to face service went live from 5th July. This operates in Newark Library on Wednesdays (market day) and Mondays as this is the library's busiest day with a weekly surgery in Ollerton Library on Fridays as this is their busiest day.

Rushcliffe - discussions are still ongoing with District Council colleagues. In the interim business cards have been produced containing the Customer Service Centre contact details and have been distributed to libraries, county hall reception and other possible contact points throughout the district.

Customer Service Centre

9. Work is ongoing to streamline processes and systems and generate efficiencies and service improvements within the Customer Service Centre. Work is also being undertaken as part of the cross-cutting Service Review process to look at how the increased utilisation of the Customer Service Centre could generate savings across the whole County Council.

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Deputy Leader of the County Council