Overview

In one of his first acts as Prime Minister, Gordon Brown made a statement to Parliament on constitutional reform, announcing a Green Paper, The Governance of Britain. The Paper takes a broad overview of constitutional issues, and makes some substantial suggestions of national significance. This briefing focuses on those issues that will be of particular significance to local government, noting where these refer to England only.

- Citizen participation: there will be consultation on proposals for increasing participation in England: a formal petitioning process; requirements for citizens’ juries; powers of redress to scrutinise and improve the delivery of local services; powers to ballot on spending decisions. Some electoral reform is also possible.

- Key proposals that could be loosely termed ‘structural’ include:
  o a concordat between central and local government, establishing the rights and responsibilities of local government in England
  o a British statement of values
  o in the long-term, consideration of a Bill of Rights and written constitution.

- Citizenship and national identity: the government plans to:
  o consider the recommendations of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion in the context of improving the experience of recently arrived migrants and the communities in which they live
  o establish a Youth Citizenship Commission which among other topics will consider the need for further support for schools, citizenship ceremonies, and a reduction in the voting age
  o establish a review of citizenship, to look at legal aspects of rights and responsibilities.

- English Regions: the roles and responsibilities of the recently appointed regional ministers are clarified. Nine regional select committees are proposed, so making the new ministers directly accountable to Parliament.

Consultations on aspects of the proposals will begin during the autumn. The LGIU is considering the recommendations, and will keep affiliates informed of developments. Relevant links are provided.

Briefing in full

The Governance of Britain: issues of relevance to local government
Proposals for improving direct democracy in England

The Green Paper describes a tripartite relationship between government, parliament, and local communities. It emphasises the need to enable people to become active citizens, and makes a commitment to devolve power directly to people. It is proposed to consult on the following topics:

- 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
- powers to ballot on spending decisions.

The Local Government White Paper, Strong and Prosperous Communities, proposed a community call for action, and opportunities for local asset management, together with a revised duty requiring authorities to involve local people. The introduction of Local Area Agreements will formally set out local priorities.

Describing the White Paper as a first step, the Green Paper proposes a number of other ways to strengthen the ability of citizens to influence local decisions and hold service providers to account:

- A formal petitioning system, that would require 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.
- 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.
- The provision of regular and accessible real-time data on local services, and other options for citizens to contribute to services in the area and ensure that service providers feel more accountable to them.
- Support for members of the public who undertake governance and scrutiny responsibilities.

The Green Paper gives a short paragraph to representative democracy, and the necessity for citizens to understand the different roles and responsibilities of central and local government. In what is intended to be a mark of confidence in local government, it is proposed that the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government now work with the Local Government Association to establish a concordat between central and local government. It is intended that “this will establish for the first time an agreement on the rights and responsibilities of local government, including its responsibilities to provide effective leadership the local area and to empower local communities where possible”.

Regional government in England

There are currently nine government offices (GOs) in England, and nine regional development agencies (RDAs). Among the first group of ministers appointed in June 2007, were nine regional ministers, now responsible for the English regions, with a brief to:

- provide a sense of strategic direction
- give citizens a voice in central government
- ensure that government policy takes account of the differing needs of the nine English regions
- raise the profile central government in the regions.
The functions of these new ministers will focus on the responsibilities of GOs and RDAs, particularly in relation to economic development. They are to be accountable to Parliament, taking questions on the work of regional bodies and on regional strategies. The Green Paper envisages a number of ways in which regional ministers will play an advocacy and representative role, and facilitate a joined-up approach across government departments and agencies.

It is proposed that Parliament establish nine regional select committees, as recommended by the Communities and Local Government Select Committee in its recent report "Is there a future for regional government?". Harriet Harman, Leader of the House, has said that she will take responsibility for resolving these arrangements in answer to oral questions on 5 July 2007.

In parallel to these changes, government has made a commitment to publish its Sub-National Review of Economic Development which will provide for city regions, and a clear role for the regions of England.

Citizenship and a sense of national identity

It is proposed to review existing measures designed to ensure new arrivals from abroad are integrated and to help local authorities build cohesion strategies. The government makes a commitment to consider the recommendations of the recent report of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion in this light.

The Green Paper pays particular attention to young people, following the introduction of citizenship education into the curriculum. There remain serious concerns about the participation of young people in the formal political process.

It is now proposed to establish a Youth Citizenship Commission, which will:

- examine ways to invigorate young people's understanding of history and what it means to be a British citizen
- consider what support schools in England need to improve the ways they prepare young people for adulthood
- consider how citizenship education can be connected to both a citizenship ceremony when young people reach adulthood and to the acquisition of voting rights
- consider whether reducing the voting age would increase participation in the political process.

There will also be a review of citizenship to be conducted by Lord Goldsmith, which will examine legal aspects of rights and responsibilities, civic participation, and the nature of social responsibilities.

Electoral Issues

Local authorities will be consulted on the implications of moving the voting day for general and/or local elections from Thursday to the weekend. It is anticipated that the current review of those voting systems introduced since 1997, will be completed by the end of 2007.

A British Statement of Values

The government will initiate a national debate with a view to producing a British statement...
of values which would have the support of the widest range of individuals and organisations, including local authorities.

A British Bill of Rights

The consultation over the British statement of values is seen as the start of a process which will, over an extended period of time, make it possible to judge the value of a British Bill of Rights. The government sees the Human Rights Act as a first step on the journey towards identifying the need for a Bill linking rights to responsibilities, and defining more clearly "what it means to be British".

A Written Constitution

The Green Paper acknowledges a growing recognition of the need to be clearer about "what it means to be the United Kingdom". Resolving these issues, possibly over decades, could lead to a concordat between the executive and parliament, or to a written constitution.

Commentary

Improving direct democracy

LGIU will look closely at the detail of the government's proposals for citizenship participation when they are published. Increased involvement in decision-making should empower communities without reducing the capacity of councils to resolve conflicting local priorities, and should strengthen the role of councillors to act on behalf of their communities. The introduction of ballots, which will allow communities to identify funding priorities, announced by the Secretary of State on 5 July, should achieve these objectives if experience in other countries bears fruit here.

The Green Paper deals at length with participatory democracy, but makes only brief reference to local representation. There is no recognition of the role and responsibilities of councillors; the need to address diversity in the recruitment of councillors, and to continue to strengthen the role and capacity of councillors representing local communities. The findings of the recent all-party Parliamentary group, and the forthcoming report from the Roberts inquiry, are therefore highly pertinent, and should be pressed in any response to this Green Paper.

Although the Green Paper acknowledges that there is now a range of local service providers, the measures that are intended to improve citizen engagement focus in the main on local authority responsibilities. There is a strong case for services beyond the council being subject to requirements to consult and being subject to scrutiny.

English regions

It will be critically important that the new ministers are accountable to Parliament, and that they should be seen answering Parliamentary questions, as well as being answerable to select committees. The select committee process is likely to bring significant regional issues to national attention, but the clarification of the future of English regions is now urgent. LGIU wants to see the early publication of the report from the sub-national review of economic development.

It will also be important that the new ministers and regional select committees establish positive relationships with regional chambers / assemblies: ministers could have a positive
accountability responsibility to Assemblies. In London, the role of the regional minister needs to be thought through carefully. Here, the RDA is clearly accountable to the mayor and the Greater London Authority, and it is important that any new arrangements do not undermine that relationship, and move in the direction of decentralisation.

Central local relations in England

We welcome the commitment to establish a concordat between central and local government, something which LGIU has been pressing for since the findings of the commission on local governance in 2002. The negotiations between the DCLG and the Local Government Association should be informed by consultation with the widest range of stakeholders with an interest in the future of local government.

Citizenship

We welcome the decision to look again at strengthening children's rights as citizens. Although Citizenship Education has been introduced into the school curriculum, this has been shown to be insufficient in itself to make a major difference. The LGIU will be pressing the government to work through these issues taking full account of the UK's international commitment to the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, and to involve children and young people in all aspects of the proposed reviews. The support of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion for the recommendations of the Keith Ajegbo report on strengthening citizenship in the curriculum (January 2007), if implemented by the government, should ensure that this subject is handled more confidently by teachers and becomes more relevant to young people.

The bigger picture

It is necessary to think ahead and see the resolution of current dilemmas as part of an ongoing process. The Prime Minister's reiteration of the government's commitment to the Human Rights Act is a significant marker, and should be accompanied by a further commitment, to promoting improved understanding and appropriate application of the legislation.

Any review of national governance takes place within the framework of national and international standards and commitments, and it must be hoped that the decisions made as a result of this Green Paper provide a good foundation for the future of British governance.

Additional Information

Covers

- Equalities, Social inclusion, Community cohesion
- Democracy, Governance, Councillor issues, Standards board, Neighbourhood governance, Regional governance, Local government information
- Corporate management, Audit and Inspection, Evaluation, Targets, Procurement
- Community planning and well-being
- Community involvement, Partnerships and LSPs, Voluntary sector
- Children's services

Question
Send Feedback for this briefing

Related links

- The Governance of Britain pdf
- The Governance of Britain ordering details
- Strong and Prosperous Communities: the White Paper
- DCLG Select Committee report on Regional Government

Related briefings

- White Paper 2006: Implications for Neighbourhoods
- Strong and prosperous communities: an overview of the Local Government White Paper
- Ministerial, Shadow and regional responsibilities July 2007

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