



Adam Fineberg links strong and prosperous communities with smart local government

The local government white paper represents 'work in progress' in terms of a concerted, cross-government effort to address the needs of all local communities. The four year old growth coalitions project, (and its more recent concept of smart local government) has assisted in developing a progressive, shared agenda.

Growth coalitions called for 'a utilisation of the tools of government to help make things work better' - incentivisation. Smart local government

set out to realise new regimes for regeneration and public services in the context of the future of local government.

The white paper lays down the groundwork for this. The first volume explains what groundwork needs to be laid to strengthen the role of local authorities as local leaders, working through the mechanism of local strategic partnerships and sustainable community strategies, with reformed local area agreements becoming the action plan for these enhanced efforts.

Other local public service partners will be obliged to play ball and will become more accountable for

their actions through the revised council scrutiny role. An improved performance framework ensures all agencies and initiatives are singing to the same tune.

The second volume sets out the potential overarching objective (and driver) for all these efforts, addressing the local economy. It almost seems prepared by the Treasury, setting down the basis for a future Brown-led government imprint on the whole agenda.

After all, it is the Treasury which is hosting the Lyons review of the future of local government, due to report before the year's end, and the Treasury which will establish the priorities for renewal in next year's comprehensive spending review. The timing well suits chancellor Gordon Brown's contribution to the agenda.

Adam Fineberg is a policy and regeneration consultant, www.growthcoalitions.org.uk

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Geoff Mulgan puts the white paper to the empowerment test

This white paper is a step towards a genuine shift in power from central to local government, and local government to communities. It's a move in the right direction – though it doesn't go as far, or on as broad a front, as many had hoped.

The Young Foundation has developed five simple tests to determine whether the white paper is a real commitment to devolution.

1. Will there be a substantial shift of power and money from Whitehall to town halls, and town halls to communities?
2. Does the white paper live up to decentralising rhetoric and introduce clear rights for people everywhere easily to set up democratic community councils – with powers of well-being, able to act on

the issues like grime and crime that matter most at very local level?

3. Are there just a few essential requirements for local government, largely to open up public influence over mainstream services?
4. Are there new rights for people to challenge and call local agencies to account, through their representatives and directly – as is beginning to happen with the police?
5. Will Whitehall let go, allowing public agencies to team up to respond better to local needs?

Over the next few months it's vital that government maintains the momentum and doesn't further dilute decentralising rhetoric with centralising small print. But it's also now up to local authorities to turn devolutionary rhetoric into a reality through practical action in communities.



Geoff Mulgan is director of the Young Foundation and former head of policy at No10

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community group to run for community benefit.

They will be given a role in triggering local charters, determining minimum service standards in a locality.

Best value is to be extended, with community groups specified as having a role in the designing, delivering and reviewing of public services. Support is offered for more tenant management organisations.

Just as important is the stronger participation of the local VCS in local strategic partnerships. The white paper makes clear that the modern role for a local authority is as a place shaper, but that this can only be achieved in partnership with other statutory and voluntary organisations.

But while the government supports a greater role for the local VCS, we will not be ecstatic until we see the evidence of all local authorities endorsing this approach through action and funding.

We are very happy, but we do not kid ourselves that we have reached our destination.

Neil Cleeveley is director of policy and information at the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action. Navca's manifesto for stronger communities and its representation to the comprehensive spending review are available at www.navca.org.uk



Multi area agreements could offer smaller cities new opportunities, says Richard Atkins

Smaller cities know they can only deliver if they work in partnership with neighbouring districts, counties and a host of other key bodies.

Here, the white paper announces a new duty that obliges bodies to work in partnership within local authority boundaries. Partners must agree 35 locally tailored priorities in a local area agreement (LAA). But – and this is where smaller cities might be taking their chance on a bid for unitary status – if LAAs can only be drawn up by unitary authorities or counties, what of the urban vision of smaller cities that happen to have district status? Will the growth focused agenda some of these cities exhibit, and the opportunity they present to help solve the housing shortfall on brownfield land, be watered down by less ambitious forces?

Perhaps the answer will be in multi area agreements. The white paper gives encouraging signs that cross-boundary partnerships are to be encouraged and rewarded.

The benefits to government are clear.

Smaller cities that share resources, expertise and influence are better placed to deliver ambitious programmes of growth than those that work alone.

Multi area agreements are very much a work in progress. In time, I hope they will include collaboration between cities that share problems as well as partnerships between local authorities that share geographic boundaries.

But, as ever, the challenge is governance. Powers to work together will only come with clear, accountable leadership.

This is where city collaborations must make their voices heard. It takes strong individual leadership to form a partnership like Regional Cities East and strong collective leadership to share resources and collaborate rather than compete for inward investment.

I hope the framework that emerges from this white paper allows government to work with collective leadership as well as powerful individuals. Otherwise, the potential of England's smaller cities will never be properly realised.

Richard Atkins is chair of Regional Cities East