

Response to Cabinet public engagement event
Liverpool 2008

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1. Introduction

When the Cabinet met in Liverpool on the morning of Thursday 8 January, I said that I would ensure we wrote to participants to record the day and answer the questions raised. This note looks to fulfil that promise.

In the days leading up to the meeting, Cabinet Ministers visited a series of places across the North West region, including a fire station, a jobcentre, a health care centre, a school and a number of local businesses. They then sat down with around 220 local people for a round table discussion during which they aimed to answer any questions raised.

This is an important process. It is vital that the Cabinet gets the chance to hear what people across the country really think. This event allowed us to do just that. The discussion covered a broad range of important topics and this document summarises the points that were made by the participants and gives the Government's response.



2. North-West Issues

Regeneration

What the public thought:

How can people get more involved in the **regeneration of their local areas**, such as the urban space in the Liverpool 5 area?

The Government response:

The Government recognises that effective regeneration strategies should involve local residents since community participation generally ensures that plans for an area's future are appropriate. Learning from a community's first-hand knowledge also leads to improved decision making. That is why the Government published ***Communities in Control*** last summer. This report outlined ways in which power could be passed onto local citizens and communities, with Local Authorities playing a central role in giving them real control and influence over their neighbourhoods.

North West initiatives

What the public thought:

The Post-Panamax Terminal is a £100 million project that will provide **infrastructure investment**, create jobs and training and improve the region's green footprint. Given the drop in private investment, will the Government consider investing in this and other projects in the region?

The Government response:

The UK has a strong ports industry. This is a largely **unsubsidised, market-led sector** where ports compete freely with each other. The Government supports this approach, mainly by providing light-touch regulation, where it is needed to meet safety, security and environmental objectives. The Government's interim report on ports policy pointed out that most major port operations are privately financed, and by providing sufficient capacity have demonstrated that the sector can operate successfully without state aid and regional funding. Subsidising port operations should therefore be avoided as much as possible as it would distort competition.

Policy making

What the public thought:

When it comes to policy making, the Government likes to go for the easy 'one size fits all' option. It needs to recognise that **different areas face different problems**. This is particularly true for Cumbria which has a unique combination of high volumes of tourists and sparse population distribution.

The Government response:

The Government agrees that national priorities need to be tailored to different places. That is why we introduced the new Local Area Agreements (LAAs) last year. These move away from 'one size fits all' Whitehall targets and allow individual areas to tell the Government what is important to them. Cumbria's LAA is a good example: its priorities are tailored to its particular needs and are only shared with areas that have similar needs. For instance, 19 of Cumbria's 35 priorities are shared by only half of all local areas or fewer. 14 of them are shared with only a third.

Working with Scotland

What the public thought:

When it comes to the economy and infrastructure, are there plans to **co-ordinate thinking** between the North West region and the South West of Scotland?

The Government response:

The North West and South West Scotland regions deal with **issues of common concern** and interest as they arise. Examples include Carlisle Renaissance's baseline work on the M6 corridor; the M6/M74 Cumberland Gap Gretna junction; and the Airport Consultative Committee work relating to Carlisle Airport in which Dumfries & Galloway Council is involved. The Chair of the Cumbria Tourism Board has also announced that he is to meet the Chair of Visit Scotland to discuss cross border tourism matters.

Rural deprivation

What the public thought:

Rural deprivation is a big issue in Cumbria. How is the Government making sure that issues affecting **rural communities** remain high up on its agenda?

The Government response:

The Government is committed to tackling poverty and deprivation wherever they occur. While the needs of people living in rural areas should be met primarily through education, health and other policies, the geography and demography of rural areas does create challenges that require very specific responses. The Government has therefore established the **Commission for Rural Communities**. This body will act as a rural adviser, advocate and watchdog. With a particular focus on deprivation, it will ensure Government policies are delivered effectively in rural areas.

Gross Value Added figures

What the public thought:

North West Regional Development Agency (NWDA) assistance is not available to **Social Enterprises** because the NWDA's prime target is to improve regional Gross Value Added (GVA) figures. Excluding Social Enterprises from GVA may be unintentionally weakening a potentially important resource.

The Government response:

Regional GVA is calculated by adding up all incomes earned by individuals and corporations based in a region. This includes Compensation of Employees (mainly wages and salaries) and Operating Surplus (mainly profits). Wages paid to employees of Social Enterprises will therefore be **included in regional GVA**, as would any operating surplus, although such organisations are likely to be non-profit making. The impact of Social Enterprises through other businesses, organisations or individuals, will also be reflected in that region's GVA. Any assistance to Social Enterprises which results in employment will therefore have an impact on regional GVA.

3. Economy

Accountability

What the public thought:

Why aren't high level banking executives being held **accountable** for the part they have played in the current economic downturn?

The Government response:

Banking executives need to be accountable for their actions. It is the responsibility of directors and shareholders of banks to hold their senior management to account, and in some cases this has happened. Whenever the Government becomes a shareholder by recapitalising a bank, it attaches conditions which **hold banking executives accountable**. These also relate to senior executive remuneration.

VAT and interest rate reductions

What the public thought:

The reductions in both VAT and interest rates don't appear to have been particularly **effective** in kick-starting the economy.

The Government response:

The Government's fiscal stimulus acts alongside changes to monetary policy and the depreciation of sterling. It also works in tandem with the boost to real incomes that has come from recent falls in commodity prices and the assumed easing of credit conditions. All of these developments have been supported by the Government's comprehensive measures to stabilise the banking system.

On its own, the VAT reduction will **leave £12.4 billion with consumers**. This represents around £275 for every household that would otherwise have been taken in tax. Regardless of whether this money is spent on increasing consumption, reducing debt or keeping businesses going, it will help support the economy. One month into the reduction, however, is too early to assess its impact.

Credit

What the public thought:

The current fiscal stimulus does not seem to be filtering down to small and medium size enterprises and banks are still **not lending sufficiently** or passing on the cut in interest rates quickly enough.

The Government response:

The Government and the Bank of England have taken urgent action to support financial stability and ensure consumers get a **fair deal**. An important step has been the creation of the new Lending Panel. This brings together Government, banks, trade bodies, regulators and consumer groups to monitor lending to businesses and households.

Supporting failing businesses

What the public thought:

The Government supported the banking sector and is looking at supporting certain British car manufacturers yet no support was given to **Woolworths**. Why?

The Government response:

The owners, investors and private lenders of individual companies must be responsible for putting their businesses on a viable footing. The Government can only act as a **'lender of last resort'**, and even then it must focus on those which represent the greatest economic risk to the UK. In the case of the banks, a support package was necessary due to the systemic impact their failure would have on the economy.

Funding

What the public thought:

The rules governing public sector borrowing should be **more flexible** to enable bodies like the Police to bring forward capital projects.

The Government response:

As announced in the Pre-Budget Report, a fiscal stimulus, including **£3 billion of capital expenditure** on schools, transport and homes, will be brought forward from 2010-11 to 2008-09 and 2009-10, to support the economy. The Government is currently working to ensure that this additional spending is delivered and front line organisations play an important role in delivering it.

Preparing for upturn

What the public thought:

Different forecasts from analysts make it difficult to plan but we need to **be prepared** for what will happen beyond the recession.

The Government response:

The credit crunch is continuing to have a real effect on countries right across the world and is inevitably affecting us here in Britain. The Government's immediate priority is to carry on **supporting the economy** through these difficult times. Looking to the future, the Government remains committed to the macroeconomic framework, but it is also important that the UK is ready to **exploit the global opportunities** that will arise once these current challenges have been successfully tackled.

4. Business

Local recruitment

What the public thought:

To make sure that their investment is realised within the community, some companies encourage local people to apply for posts by using '**postcoded**' recruitment. Is this an approach the Government could promote?

The Government response:

If companies are expanding and recruiting, it is important that they have access to people with the **right skills and expertise**. Meeting the needs of the business will benefit the overall community and the wider economy.

Local business

What the public thought:

Local businesses and small retailers in market towns are losing out to city centre shopping complexes. Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP) need to work with Government to **develop town centres** with attractive retail and business opportunities for local communities.

The Government response:

All Local Authorities need a network of convenient, local centres that meet the day-to-day needs of the whole community. Larger centres have been the focus of much development and investment in recent years, often leaving deprived areas with poor access to local shops and services. In rural areas, however, market towns and villages should be the main service providers. They should be a **focus for economic development**, providing markets for locally produced food and the products of rural industries.

While the health and vitality of many **market towns** has declined in recent years, the Government is committed to helping them manage the process of change and strengthen their role as rural service providers. As part of this process of regeneration, Local Authorities are required to work with communities and the private sector to identify opportunities for action.

Help to small businesses

What the public thought:

Small businesses are suffering most in the current economic downturn. There are some business support measures available, but there seems to be little **understanding of the options** and how they can be accessed. To maximise their impact, more should be done to highlight them.

Banks are still reluctant to lend money to small businesses and even when they do they charge exorbitant interest fees. Can the Government re-introduce a loan guarantee scheme?

The Government response:

To help communicate its business support measures, the Government has launched a **Real Help campaign** (www.businesslink.gov.uk/realhelp/finance). This will help businesses understand what assistance they may be eligible for and how to get it.

One of these measures is the new Enterprise Finance Guarantee. This expands the loan guarantee scheme the Government has operated for the past 20 years and replaces the Small Firms Loan Guarantee. In addition, a new Working Capital Scheme offers a Government guarantee on a portfolio of bank loans. This aims to encourage lending and free up capital for further onward lending.

Business link

What the public thought:

To help businesses through the current downturn, Business Link should return to the more **'hands-on' service** it used to provide rather than stick with the current web-based advice service.

The Government response:

Business Link continues to provide a face-to-face service for businesses through a network of 1,200 advisors across England. In the 12 months to September 2008, over 910,000 businesses engaged with Business Link this way. Of these, just under 70,000 benefited from intensive one-to-one support from an advisor.

To help businesses through the current economic conditions, Business Link is offering **free 'health checks'** to provide an in-depth look at all aspects of a business's performance. In the ten weeks to 8 January 2009, over 16,000 enterprises have taken advantage of this service, including over 1,500 in the North West (www.businesslink.gov.uk or 0845 6009006).

Global competition

What the public said:

How can **local manufacturing industries** be stimulated to compete in global markets?

The Government response:

Companies can develop their international trade potential and access international markets with the help of **UK Trade & Investment** (UKTI). UKTI maintains a network of international business specialists throughout the UK and diplomatic offices around the world. It can help companies take part in trade fairs and outward missions, as well as provide market intelligence and advice on how to set up an office abroad. Financial assistance is also available to eligible SMEs.

Pension protection fund

What the public thought:

The **pension protection fund** is an issue for larger businesses, particularly as the contributions levy increases as businesses fail.

The Government response:

The Pension Protection Fund provides security and reassurance to around 12 million scheme members. It is partly funded by levies on eligible defined benefit pension schemes and, as promised, **the Fund will keep the levy it charges schemes for 2009/10 at £700 million** – the same level as 2008/09, indexed to earnings. The Pension Protection Fund will continue to work alongside businesses to ensure the levy continues to strike the right balance between security for scheme members and affordability for the levy payer.

5. Skills and Apprenticeships

Vision for the future

What the public thought:

We need to think about the Britain of the future. We need to know what we want it to look like and **what skills will be needed** to fill the gaps – that way young people can be encouraged to pursue careers in the necessary sectors.

The Government response:

The Government fully agrees that there is a need to take a strategic look at the skills system. We have to encourage business activities and sectors which have the greatest potential to grow in an increasingly competitive global market place. This means talking to business about what they see as their future skills gaps and **ensuring that our training system is responsive**.

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills is an independent employer body that monitors areas of growth, challenges and trends and advises the Government on skills gaps and shortages in the economy. We can use this information to tailor our skills system and ensure young people and adults receive the best advice about their options.

Skills deficit

What the public thought:

Filling vacancies with technical experts is a challenge. What can be done to address the UK's **technical skills deficit**?

The Government response:

As Lord Leitch's review of the country's skills made clear: there will be far fewer jobs requiring low level skills in 2020 so we need to raise skills at all levels. While the number of people with high level skills has been increasing, more can be still be done. One way the Government is aiming to increase the numbers of people in the workforce with higher level qualifications is through widening participation in Higher Education. We are also increasing craft and technical skills by making over 250,000 apprenticeship places available next year.

Re-skilling

What the public thought:

Businesses will focus on re-skilling during periods of worklessness. Allowances will be made for re-training but re-skilling employees is difficult without them **spending 1-2 days per week in college**.

The Government response:

Learning and acquiring skills will always involve some down-time. Wage compensation, however, is available for employers who train their workforce through **Train to Gain** (employer-led training provision). The CBI's recent report, *Reaching Further*, outlines how colleges and businesses have worked together to produce very successful arrangements, while the Government is also encouraging **colleges to become more flexible**. This means colleges opening later, offering bite-size courses which are proven to improve productivity for businesses, and modernising their buildings and facilities.

Train to Gain

What the public thought:

The *Train to Gain* programme has really helped businesses. To enable more people to benefit in the current economic climate, however, it may need to **be more flexible**.

The Government response:

Train to Gain works. Over 100,000 employers have benefited in the last two years and 83% said they were happy with the service they received. In order to respond to the current economic downturn, however, the Government has **radically reconfigured the programme**. We have relaxed rules so that SMEs can get funding for bite-size courses in business critical-areas and more funding to retrain employees who already have qualifications. We will be spending almost **£1 billion** on *Train to Gain* this year.

Qualifications

What the public thought:

There appears to be a contradiction between graduate unemployment and the Government's ambition to increase the percentage of the workforce qualified to NVQ levels 4 and 5. This suggests that the Government needs to think harder about making the best use of the **skills and talents of people facing unemployment**.

The Government response:

In Japan, Canada, and the US around 40% of the workforce have high level skills. To compete internationally, the UK therefore needs a much higher proportion of the labour force with higher level skills. This will bring long-term benefits, whether or not we are currently in a period of economic downturn.

Graduates will not be immune from the effects of the downturn, of course and the Government does recognise that some individuals may face particular difficulties. We are therefore **increasing the support available** through more internship places and Professional Career Development Loans to support postgraduate learning. Enterprising graduates will continue to find the best solutions for their own personal circumstances. In doing so, they will make full use of the skills that employers are looking for.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

What the public thought:

ICT will have a significant impact on future working lives. It is also a national growth sector. This should be taken into account when considering what training is required for those currently unemployed.

The Government response:

It is important to understand what kind of ICT training will be needed for the jobs of the future. Sector Skills Councils have been established to **assess skill needs for different sectors** and these will help determine what training is made available whether it is for unemployed people or a degree level. e-Skills, the Sector Skills Council for ICT, for example, will help ensure employers have access to the right training and that trainees and graduates have access to worthwhile jobs.

Apprenticeships

What the public thought:

The Government's promotion of apprenticeship schemes is welcome but the economic downturn has seen the number of apprenticeships offered by businesses drop. Some **companies are not retaining their apprentices** at the end of their apprenticeships either.

The Government response:

In 2007/08 a record 225,000 people started an apprenticeship. The Government is taking a wide range of steps to encourage more people to take them up and encourage more employers to offer high quality places. To help strengthen the country's competitiveness, the Prime Minister recently announced a £140 million package to provide an **extra 35,000 apprenticeship** places over the coming year in both the public and private sectors. The forthcoming Children, Skills and Learning Bill will also call for an apprenticeship place to be made available for all suitably qualified young people by 2013.

What the public thought:

The Government is committed to ensuring 1 in 5 young people are participating in an apprenticeship scheme by 2018. Does this mean that there will be fewer **opportunities for young people** to attend university?

The Government response:

Vocational routes to Higher Education should be regarded equally with academic routes. While the benefits associated with going to university remain true, the expansion of apprenticeships will mean young people have **more options for progressing to higher education**. Any suitably qualified young person will be able to take up an apprenticeship by 2013 and since they are demand-led, we expect that around 1 in 5 young people will want one. We do not expect this to dissuade young people from going to university, however, apprenticeships offer an additional route to higher education, and the Government is committed to incorporating them into the UCAS tariff.

What the public thought:

Apprenticeships only attract a certain type of motivated young person. More needs to be done to **help those who need a bit more encouragement**.

The Government response:

Apprenticeships attract a wide range of people who want to obtain recognised qualifications in the workplace. For those young people who are not yet ready for work, there are support arrangements. These include entry to employment and the new Diplomas that ensure all young people in school have the opportunity to study and gain experience of the workplace. The Government also has specific strategies aimed at **reducing social exclusion among vulnerable groups**, improving Information, Advice and Guidance services to help young people into education, employment or training.

What the public thought:

In general, the public sector has embraced the apprenticeships scheme. There are concerns, however, that the **Health Service demands** qualifications to entry which may exclude those at an educational disadvantage.

The Government response:

The Department of Health and the Skills for Health sector skills council are developing an action plan to improve uptake of apprenticeships in the NHS and wider public health sector. To **reduce barriers to entry** to apprenticeship courses, this plan will involve officials from other Government Departments such as DIUS, DCSF and the Learning and Skills Council.

6. Employment

Jobcentre Plus

What the public thought:

Jobcentre Plus should **engage more actively** with businesses to find out which sectors have job openings now and where they are likely to appear in the future. That way people can get the right training.

The Government response:

Through Jobcentre Plus, the Government actively helps many large national employers with their individual recruitment needs. It also supports the Welfare Reform Agenda through initiatives such as Local Employment Partnerships. The information we gather from national employers informs national policy for each industry sector. The Government's new Integrated Employment Offer will ensure that all employers, whether they contact JobCentre Plus, Learning Skills Council or Business Link will be able to access help and advice on recruitment, skills and business support. The industry sector skills bodies are also defining the current and future training needs of their particular sectors.

Vulnerable people

What the public thought:

Jobcentre Plus and Learning and Skills Council programmes have done a lot for people who have been out of work for a long time, particularly **helping those with additional or complex needs** find work. In the current economic climate, however, mainstream agencies are more likely to focus on those who are easier to get back into work.

The Government response:

To address the impact of the economic downturn, the Government has given the training system additional funding and made it more flexible. This does not detract from its commitment to the most vulnerable members of society. Bodies such as the Learning and Skills Council will continue to **help vulnerable people gain the skills they need** to enter into employment through a range of measures. These include full fee remission for those who receive income related benefits as well as additional funding for colleges and providers to meet the additional costs of recruiting and retaining people from disadvantaged areas.

The Government also has a public commitment to improving the employment rate of particularly vulnerable groups, through its Public Service Agreement on socially excluded adults (PSA16). As part of this, Government Departments and each local authority area will have to report on the employment rates of people in contact with secondary mental health services, people with moderate to severe learning disabilities, young people leaving care, and offenders under probation supervision.

Job visibility

What the public thought:

Since **people are still taking up jobs** while others are losing them, the Government needs to ensure the public is aware of job vacancies that do exist.

The Government response:

The Government uses a variety of ways of ensuring that people are aware of the many vacancies that exist. An example is the new Directgov and *Find your way back to work* campaign. This shows how people can apply for jobs, and tells them how they can maximise their opportunities by developing their skills. Online banner and press adverts, highlighting links to **Government job-search websites**, have been targeting people likely to be looking for work. Posters in Jobcentre Plus and stakeholder offices also encourage people to use Government websites to look for work (these include Directgov and Jobcentre Plus). Improvements are also being made to Jobcentre Plus's self-service systems. These should make it even easier for employers to post vacancies on the Jobcentre Plus website, making even more vacancies available to jobseekers.

Inter-generational worklessness

What the public thought:

How does the Government plan to **prevent and address** inter-generational worklessness?

The Government response:

The Government believes that intervention is key to tackling worklessness across the generations. In 2008, the Department for Work and Pensions commissioned an independent review of the conditions under which unemployed people receive support. This review recommended **a new set of conditions for people who are not immediately ready for work**. Essentially this means that rights to benefits are now accompanied by responsibilities. The Welfare Reform White Paper *Raising expectations and increasing support – reforming welfare for the future* illustrates what this might mean in practice, showing how the Government plans to help people prepare for work and encourage them to take up support.

The public sector

What the public thought:

The shift to **agency working arrangements** across the public sector has been accompanied by a move from permanent contracts to short-term or 'zero hours' contracts. This trend does not help financial stability and **undermines the resilience of local communities** and economies.

The Government response:

About 30% of the estimated 1.3 million agency workers in the UK are engaged in the public sector. As with all public sector workers, they are vital for the delivery of high-quality public services. Decisions about how best to deploy the resources have to be taken by public sector employers and at times they might choose to use agency and temporary staff in a variety of roles. This can offer financial benefits for employers while giving short-term career opportunities to individuals.

Benefits

What the public thought:

People outside of work are better off than those who are working. Society needs to **encourage accountability and responsibility** so the rewards for working need to outweigh those for not working – even if not in a purely monetary sense.

The Government response:

Benefit rules are designed to strike a balance between providing for need and maintaining and, where possible, improving, work incentives. How much better off an individual or family is in work will depend on a number of factors specific to that individual or family. Since 1997, this Government has put in place a number of reforms to help **make sure that work pays more than welfare**. These include the introduction of the National Minimum Wage, the Working Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit. Additionally, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit are still available to people who work, depending on their individual circumstances. Help with NHS charges is also available to people with limited resources.

7. Education

Life skills

What the public thought:

The current educational system seems to focus too much on exam results that lead to a degree. It is more important to **prepare students for 'real-life' problems** by developing skills such as confidence, innovation and financial management.

The Government response:

This year a new curriculum was launched in secondary schools. It is designed to help young people gain the skills they need to be confident citizens who make positive contributions to society. There is a new **emphasis on the personal skills that are valued by employers**, such as team work, creative thinking and problem solving. The Government has also introduced financial capability as part of personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education. This year there will be consultations on making the teaching of PSHE compulsory, in recognition of the role it plays in helping children and young people make positive, healthy life choices.

Numeracy and literacy

What the public thought:

Even at graduate level, some students seem to lack **basic numeracy and literacy skills**. This is a real problem for businesses looking to recruit.

The Government response:

Standards of literacy and numeracy in our schools are at their highest ever levels with significant improvements in achievement over the past decade. The Government is continuing to work to improve standards through the **National Strategies** which were introduced to raise standards of achievement and rates of progression for children and young people.

The Government encourages higher education institutions to **engage with employers** to ensure that provision is in line with business needs. Evidence indicates that, generally, employers are happy with the quality of the graduates they recruit. In a recent survey, 84% thought their recruits were very well or well prepared for work. The Government knows employers also value broad 'employability' skills – communication, motivation, independence, analysis, confidence, and problem solving. These are skills that a good higher education experience delivers.

Languages

What the public thought:

Language learning in schools has not been very successful. Languages should be taught at an earlier age and other languages such as Spanish, and possibly Mandarin, should also be considered.

The Government response:

Most primary schools (84%) in England are actually already teaching languages to 7 to 11 year olds (key stage 2). From September 2011, it will be compulsory for all of them to do so. The Government is also helping this process by providing money to pay for teacher training. Although French remains the most popular choice, schools are teaching a variety of alternatives, with some offering Spanish and a few already offering Chinese languages.

8. Young people and families

Children in care

What the public thought:

The law is clear: children who are considered to be at risk should be taken into care – but more still needs to be done to **prevent abuse** from happening in the first place.

The Government response:

From April, DCSF will be funding the new 'Think Family' approach. Co-ordinating support for families experiencing problems, this initiative will give intensive family-focused, parenting help to the most chaotic families and those with the most complex problems. It is an approach that has been shown to achieve significant reductions in anti-social behaviour, offending and evictions from social housing. As a result, it will help reduce the number of children likely to be placed at risk in the future. The Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families has also asked Lord Laming to report on good practice in safeguarding children, the barriers that may impede effective working and how they can be overcome. Lord Laming is due to report his findings by the end of February.

Media perceptions

What the public thought:

Young people tend to be demonised by society, a perception perpetuated by the media. To dispel this negative perception, we need to promote the **positive involvement of young people** with society.

The Government response:

There is already a cross-Government strategy working to counteract negative local and national media coverage by promoting good news stories about young people. Young people need a better public image and this initiative celebrates what they do well and allows them to have a real say in the services provided for them.

Over 1.5 million young people have been involved in our **Youth Opportunity and Youth Capital funds**, making decisions on where the money goes and getting involved in projects that benefit both them and their communities. To help recognise all the good things that young people do, the Government is setting up a series of events across the country and looking into how a National Youth Week could showcase their achievements to the public.

Activities for young people

What the public thought:

There are not enough **facilities or activities for young people** to get involved with, especially on Friday nights and weekends. This leads to social problems, including low aspirations and unemployment and, as a result, alcohol and drug problems. More should be done to make facilities such as schools and sports centres, open to the community with activities that can aid a young person's development.

The Government response:

The Government is committed to providing more and better places for young people to go. *Aiming high for young people: a ten year strategy for positive activities* sets out the Government's vision for new and improved youth facilities in every constituency over the next 10 years. Myplace is kick-starting this process, **investing over £200 million in the most ambitious projects**. These will be open at times requested by local young people, such as Friday and Saturday nights. We are also encouraging local areas to make the most of existing community assets and available funding. This includes nearly £80 million of youth-led Youth Capital Funds which are available over three years for smaller scale projects.

What the public thought:

Many of the Government's objectives, such as improving health and curbing anti-social behaviour in young people, could be met by offering **free or cut-price access to leisure activities** to engage those who currently avoid these activities.

The Government response:

The Government recognises that sporting and cultural opportunities can play a unique role in meeting wider objectives. These include promoting healthy lifestyles and reducing anti-social behaviour as well as building communities and economic prosperity. From April 2009, people across England aged 16 and under and over 60, will be able to **swim for free** as part in a £140 million Government scheme. 82 per cent of councils are to offer free swimming to the over 60s and 60 per cent will offer free swimming to both the over 60s and those aged 16 and under.

From February 2009 a **£2.5 million scheme** will ensure a proportion of tickets for arts productions at over 200 venues across England are available free to anyone under 26 years old. 618,000 tickets will be available from February 2009 up to March 2011.

Opportunities

What the public thought:

Any opportunities that are available to young people should be highlighted and **communicated** as clearly as possible.

The Government response:

All young people need good information about the opportunities and services available within their area. **Local Authorities** are now required to publicise up-to-date information on positive activities for young people – and they now have additional funding to enable them to do this effectively. The Government is also working with a group of Local Authorities to find the best ways of reaching young people and enabling them to generate and share their own information and views about local services and events.

Agencies

What the public thought:

To provide the best possible service, different agencies that work with young people should **pool resources** and co-ordinate their work.

The Government response:

We agree. The Government aims to give every child and young person the support they need, when they need it. **Integrated working** is central to achieving this aim, bringing together services and practitioners across agencies and professional groups, from leaders and managers, through middle managers, line managers and supervisors to practitioners and the families themselves. All local areas also have **Children's Trust partnership** arrangements in place to develop the local strategy for improving children's lives.

Police

What the public thought:

Taking a heavy-handed approach towards young people breeds animosity and leads to further violence. The police need **specific training** on how to deal with young people.

The Government response:

Neighbourhood policing teams now operate in every area of the country. As outlined in their **local policing pledge**, their role is to work with communities, schools and local residents to identify priority issues in the community. This approach means engaging positively with young people on the issue that matter to them. **Safer Schools Partnerships** have also been shown to improve relations between the police and young people. The Government is committed to expanding this successful programme.

Exclusive language

What the public thought:

Ministers often use the phrase 'decent hard working families' which may make some groups of people feel **excluded**.

The Government response:

The Government recognises that families play a vital role looking after family members and helping children get on in life. The phrase 'decent and hardworking' reflects this. All families benefit from support at some time and the Government is committed to helping families help themselves and reducing the pressures they face. Of course, some families need and want more support than others and the support they receive must come hand in hand with the recognition that families have responsibilities too – to family members and to others in society.

9. Communities and Local Government

Capital of culture

What the public thought:

Being the Capital of Culture has had a huge impact on Liverpool's community confidence but its **long-term legacy** is crucial. Could the event be repeated elsewhere in the country by creating an annual UK Capital of Culture?

The Government response:

The long-term legacy is indeed critical and Liverpool is the first city to conduct a long-term assessment looking at the economic, social, cultural and physical impact of being a European Capital of Culture. A final **report will be published in summer** 2009, and the Government will take account of the findings when considering proposals for any UK-wide activity.

As a first step, the Government will establish a **working group** to consider the feasibility of a British City of Culture programme, including when and how frequently such a title might be awarded, and how it might fit with and affect the Cultural Olympiad that is planned as part of the celebrations for the 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games.

Devolution of power to local government

What the public thought:

The increasing devolution of decision-making powers to local government is welcome. This **process should not be slowed** during the economic downturn to maximise the amount of money kept within Central Government.

The Government response:

In times of great uncertainty, citizens are more anxious than ever that their concerns are properly heard by public decision-makers. The Government remains **committed to the process** of enabling local government to take more decisions locally. That way local people have more opportunities to influence decisions affecting them and their communities.

Local Area Agreements

What the public thought:

Local Area Agreements (LAAs) ensure that partners in an area work collectively to address issues. The current economic climate, however, has made it much harder for Local Authorities to deliver. Is there any scope for the current economy-dependent LAAs to be **relaxed or renegotiated**?

The Government response:

The LAA framework needs to remain robust and flexible, focusing on real priorities in each area. The current refresh of LAA targets, due to be completed by April 2009, is an opportunity to **ensure that each LAA is resilient and responsive** to the economic downturn, with targets that remain ambitious yet realistic.

What the public thought:

The LAA process may benefit if more **NHS Hospital Trusts** sign up. At the moment they are only really undertaken by the PCT commissioners of NHS services.

The Government response:

Health and social care organisations are key partners in the LAA process. The legislative framework recognises this: PCTs, NHS trusts and NHS foundation trusts are all **named statutory partners** under a duty to co-operate with Local Authorities in determining LAA targets. As named partners they are also required to abide by the targets agreed.

Prompt decision making

What the public thought:

The speed of decision-making can be crucial. In the current economic climate, the Government needs to be **more flexible with its funding arrangements** to facilitate the progress of publicly-funded projects.

The Government response:

Local Government got its first-ever three-year settlement last year. This provided stability and flexibility so budgets could be planned and managed effectively. Ten **Multi-Area Agreements** (MAA) have been signed across England. These establish strong partnerships that can work flexibly across a range of responsibilities such as skills and transport. The City Region pilots that were announced in the Pre-Budget Report build on this, testing greater flexibility over capital budgets.

Private investment

What the public thought:

European State Aid rules limit the ability of Local Authorities and regional development agencies to invest in private projects which may bring considerable social benefit to an area. To ensure that these projects go ahead, could a temporary measure to **relax the rules** be put in place during the economic downturn?

The Government response:

In November last year, the European Commission (EC) adopted a series of temporary measures allowing Member States to **address the prevailing economic turbulence**. These included: ensuring sufficient bank lending to companies; limited grants for businesses with crisis-related liquidity problems; and sustaining companies' investment in sustainable business strategies, including the development of green products. The EC has also granted the Government the option of awarding lump-sum aid up to **500,000 euros per company** over the next two years.

Regeneration/planning

What the public thought:

As private sector investment is now less available, local government should be used to drive **regeneration activities**. These projects would also be helped if the planning process was speeded up.

The Government response:

Recent Government reforms have improved many aspects of the planning process. These include dramatic improvement in the speed of Local Authority decision making; electronic applications and information; and measures in the Planning Act 2008 which will **make regeneration projects easier** to design and quicker and cheaper to implement. In November the Killian Pretty Review made a series of recommendations to further improve the planning application process. The Government has already signalled that it broadly welcomes these proposals and will set out its detailed response shortly.

Development

What the public thought:

One of the main challenges facing the North West is the provision of suitable, sustainable and affordable housing. To ensure that housing projects continue to progress, how is Government planning to help **the building sector** during the economic downturn?

The Government response:

One of the 30 Public Sector Agreements commits the Government to increasing the long-term housing supply and its affordability. The construction industry is a critical partner in achieving this commitment and the Government recognises the challenges the industry is facing. We are therefore buying up unsold private stock and making it available as affordable and social housing. We are also bringing forward **£550 million to invest in new social and affordable housing**, and spending **£425 million on repairs and maintenance** to council housing. In addition, a new 'apprentice matching service' will promote apprenticeships through large Government projects and help retain **construction industry apprentices** or place them with new employers.

Social housing

What the public thought:

The Government recently announced that council tenants would have their **rents increased by 6.2%** (more than the cost of inflation). It seems unreasonable to expect this extra expenditure from tenants who are already affected by the economic downturn.

The Government response:

The average guideline rent increases were designed to maintain affordability for tenants, while giving councils the income they need to maintain services. This **increase includes the pre-existing protection** for tenants which limits rent increases to RPI plus a half percentage point plus two pounds. Nonetheless, the concerns now being raised about inflation and the fixed guideline rent increases are fully recognised and the **situation is being monitored**.

What the public thought:

Rent from council tenants in most Local Authority areas is **clawed back by central Government** and then distributed to other local councils. This system seems unfair.

The Government response:

The redistributive part of the present system is intended to achieve a degree of equity for councils and tenants. It is clear, however, that the system is seen as creating difficulties. The Government is therefore reviewing council housing finance with the aim of **creating a sustainable system** that is fair to tenants and tax payers. Any new arrangements will need to recognise that the cost of running council housing varies across the country. The Review will report to Ministers in the spring.

Public toilets

What the public thought:

Public toilets are a public health issue. When will the Government make their provision by District Councils obligatory?

The Government response:

The Public Health Act 1936 gave Local Authorities powers to provide public toilets, but imposed no duty to do so. The Government has no plans to amend this, since **compulsion is not always the best way** of improving specific local services. The Government aims to help Local Authorities and their communities develop services that address the needs of local people. We therefore provide guides such as *Improving Public Access to Better Quality Toilets*, and approaches like community toilet schemes, but ensure the decision-making remains at local level.

10. Transport

Transport and the environment

What the public thought:

Messages about expanding road and aviation travel to support economic development seem to conflict with **commitments to cut carbon emissions**. How are these views being reconciled?

The Government response:

Delivering low carbon transport and meeting carbon budgets have to go hand-in-hand with developing a prosperous economy. The Government already has a range of measures in place to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. For transport, these include the **EU Emissions Trading Scheme** (EU ETS) for aviation and developing European mandatory emissions standards for new cars. The Government also recently announced a new £250 million package to support the development of **ultra-low carbon vehicle technology**. We have also set a target, to ensure that UK aviation CO₂ emissions remain below 2005 levels by 2050, irrespective of any growth in passenger demand.

Manchester congestion charge

What the public thought:

The proposed congestion charge in Manchester was a **missed opportunity** which could have significantly improved public transport in the area. We need other ways of **securing investment** for improvements to public transport in the North West region. This is especially important in light of the current economic downturn where improved transport links will bring in more jobs and allow products and services to be sourced more locally.

The Government response:

The Government already invests more than £2 billion a year in local and regional transport across England. This year, more than £211 million was dedicated to local transport in the North West (excluding major projects). The Government is also funding major public transport improvements in Greater Manchester through a £244 million contribution towards the Phase 3A Metrolink extension to Rochdale, Oldham and Chorlton. Any income from the congestion charge would have been on top of this.

Transport costs

What the public thought:

The cost of train fares is prohibitively high, especially for young people trying to access employment. Could a system, such as **tax relief**, be introduced to reduce costs and encourage more people to use public transport?

The Government response:

The Government protects commuters by limiting most train operators to average increases in regulated fares of no more than one per cent above inflation each year over the life of the franchise. It is **not Government policy** to provide tax relief for the cost of home-to-work commuting. However, an employer can make an **interest-free loan** available to its employees of up to £5,000 each year to help buy a season ticket with no tax consequences.

Port business rates

What the public thought:

The Valuation Office Agency changed the way port owners and tenants pay business rates. This has resulted in unexpected and **onerous payment demands** backdated to 2005. In light of the current economic situation, could backdated payments be stopped and the new rates introduced at a later date?

The Government response:

The review of ports by the Valuation Office Agency aimed to ensure that all individual businesses within and outside of ports are treated in the same way and make a **fair contribution to Local Government**. Although more properties within English ports are now being assessed for rates, the rate bills of some port operators have fallen and the total rateable value for ports and businesses within ports increased by around 4% as a result of the review.

There is a general issue for businesses receiving large backdated liabilities that have to be paid immediately. The Government will shortly be implementing measures to enable ratepayers who receive large backdated liabilities to pay through **staged payments** over a number of years and to relieve billing authorities of the duty to collect those liabilities in full in the current financial year.

National Parks

What the public thought:

What is the Government planning to do to address **gridlock and congestion** in National Parks?

The Government response:

The Government is aware that there can be congestion problems in National Parks, particularly during public holidays and other periods of increased demand. There is strong **feeling against expanding the transport infrastructure** if it adversely affects environmentally sensitive sites. However, the Government would look very carefully at whether the benefits of a particular scheme justified any negative environmental impacts. The majority of roads running through National Parks are the responsibility of local highway authorities. They have to work in conjunction with national park authorities to address these issues.

11. Energy and Environment

Economic downturn

What the public thought:

The Government seems genuinely committed to protecting the environment. There has also been a shift in the way businesses view environmental measures, seeing them as cost-saving rather than a burden. However, the Government should **ensure that the economic downturn is not used as an excuse** for making environmental practices and improvements discretionary.

The Government response:

Achieving environmental goals remains a priority whatever the economic circumstances. The Government aims to develop a clear, credible, long-term framework that gives industry the confidence to **invest in the development of low carbon products and services**. These signals include the EU ETS cap, renewables targets, binding carbon budgets through the Climate Change Act and supporting the EU target to reduce average new car emissions to 100g/km by 2020. The benefits of taking action on climate change far exceed the costs and will produce huge social and economic benefits in the long term.

In February, a **resource efficiency marketing campaign** was launched aimed at small and medium sized businesses. This will raise awareness of the Government support that is available in this area, focussing on how businesses can cut down on bills through more efficient use of water and energy.

Employment

What the public thought:

We need a **collaborative approach** to ensure that opportunities in the green renewables sector are fully realised. Environmental projects also need to be made more attractive to private investment.

The Government response:

When the Renewable Energy Strategy is finalised in spring 2009, the Government will set up the Office of Renewable Energy Deployment. This will facilitate a possible **£100 billion private sector investment** in UK energy and help ensure that as many of the estimated 160,000 new jobs in the renewable energy sector as possible are UK-based.

The **Environmental Transformation Fund** (ETF) is a cross-Government fund aimed at investing in low carbon energy/energy efficiency technologies and promoting better use of energy. The **Technology Strategy Board** (TSB) provides a range of funding that covers low carbon technologies, while the Research Councils' expenditure on energy-related research and related postgraduate training has also more than trebled since 2001.

The Government is working with industry to develop low carbon energy technologies through initiatives such as the **Energy Technologies Institute** (ETI), a new public private partnership that brings together some of the world's biggest companies to offer a strategic lead in low carbon energy research and fund its delivery. In 2009 the Government will propose a **Low Carbon Industrial Strategy**, clarifying the range of support available for low carbon technologies.

What the public thought:

Sourcing products locally could help the environment and secure jobs. When agreeing to phase out incandescent light bulbs, for example, did the Government consider local sourcing of alternative products?

The Government response:

Sourcing products locally by applying whole-life costing principles can be better for the environment, although in many cases distance travelled is only a small part of the overall footprint and value-for-money of a product. Sourcing products locally can and does help secure jobs, but **European rules** prevent Member States giving preferential treatment on the grounds of territory. Local procurement is, of course, permitted but will be the result of broader socio-economic and environmental considerations.

Most light bulbs are made outside of the UK. However, the Government recognises that removing the least efficient bulbs from the market in favour of energy-efficient ones will drive research and development into lighting technologies which are even more efficient. The UK is well placed to become a leading producer of lamps based on Light Emitting Diodes (LED) and there are already a number of SMEs producing LED lighting solutions.

Energy prices

What the public thought:

The steep rise in energy prices has been a critical issue for many people. The Government should ensure that energy providers **pass on reductions** that come from a drop in fuel prices.

The Government response:

Gas and electricity prices for households in the UK have been at or below the EU average in each of the last ten years. There were rises during 2007 but the UK is not alone in having to pay more for its energy. These increases are an indication of **our market's relative responsiveness** and, as fossil fuel costs come down, we would expect consumer prices to decrease accordingly. This will not happen immediately, however, since suppliers buy ahead. High prices from last summer may still be reflected in their costs.

The Government has asked Ofgem to publish **quarterly reports** on wholesale and retail prices. These will deliver greater transparency over future price changes. We have also encouraged retailers to pass cost savings to consumers as quickly as possible.

Recycling

What the public thought:

Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the need to reduce waste but more needs to be done with **business and industry**. They need to reduce unnecessary waste so there is less need to invest in waste management facilities.

The Government response:

The Government is looking at ways of reducing commercial and industrial waste as well as improving resource efficiency among businesses. There are already a **range of measures in place**. These include the Landfill Tax Escalator and EU Directives on packaging, end-of-life vehicles and waste electrical and electronic equipment. There are also voluntary agreements with retailers (on packaging and food waste), the construction sector (on halving the amount of waste going to landfill), and on direct mail. Government-funded bodies such as the National Industrial Symbiosis Programme and the Waste & Resources Action Programme also provide advice to business on how to improve resource efficiency.

Fox hunting

What the public thought:

Given that fox-hunting still goes on, **was the ban futile** and a waste of Government time?

The Government response:

The Government does not believe that the passage of the Hunting Act was either futile or a waste of time. The Act outlaws an activity opposed by many people across the country, while allowing lawful equestrian and pest control activities to continue. The Government is satisfied that **the Act is working**, and notes that a number of successful prosecutions have been brought. There is no evidence of widespread disregard for the law, and it is for the police and prosecuting authorities to decide whether to launch cases in the light of available evidence.

12. Health

Economic downturn

What the public thought:

The current economic climate has increased the pressures on families. Is the Government prepared for the impact this will have on the **health of the nation** and on the caseloads of health and social care workers?

The Government response:

An economic downturn may make it more difficult for some families to maintain a healthy lifestyle. People may also experience stress and worry about financial issues. Through campaigns such as **Change4Life**, and direct support to families including **Healthy Start**, the Government is working to ensure a healthy lifestyle is affordable for all. It has also invested substantially in services to support those with mental health problems. Overall, the Government has **trebled investment** in the NHS from £35 billion in 1997 to £110 billion by 2010/11 and in the last ten years, the Government increased local government funding by £28.4 billion. This investment will ensure health and social care staff can continue to improve services and deliver what patients, public and staff have told us matters most to them.

Government targets

What the public thought:

While Government targets are important for delivering short-term change they can sometimes work against long-term objectives. For example, reducing ambulance response times can **deduct focus** from activities such as helping the paramedic service engage with communities on accident and emergency prevention.

The Government response:

National targets, together with a growth in resources, have delivered significant progress: better access, improved treatment in A&E, better treatment for cancer patients and significant reductions in mortality rates from the major killer diseases. **Clinical need** has always been the Government's first consideration. Ambulance services play a key role in the community, while the NHS and Local Authorities work together to monitor injury prevention. Ambulance response times, however, are important. In cases of trauma or cardiac arrest, a quick response time can mean the **difference between life and death**.

Health governance structures

What the public thought:

Health service governance structures are not sufficiently representative. This detaches them from the communities that they serve.

The Government response:

The Government has introduced a range of policies to **strengthen accountability** and ensure local NHS organisations are representative of the communities they serve. These policies include: **empowering people** to take part in the running of local services as members of NHS Foundation Trusts; putting a legal duty on NHS organisations to involve local people and their representatives in decisions about services; and, introducing Local Involvement Networks to gather views of local people and communities. The Government is also working with the NHS Appointments Commission to **strengthen engagement** in local NHS appointments.

Healthcare associated infections

What the public thought:

Why is there still a risk of contracting infections such as **MRSA** while in hospital?

The Government response:

MRSA and *C. difficile* infections have been **significantly reduced**. The NHS has delivered the target to halve MRSA bloodstream infections. It is on course to maintain this reduction and will be setting a new national minimum standard for MRSA. The NHS is also on course to deliver the target of a 30% reduction in *C. difficile* infections. This is a **top priority** for the NHS. The Government has a strategy that works, and we have given the NHS the guidance it needs to deliver it – backed by substantial investment and a legal requirement to maintain proper infection control.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

What the public thought:

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) needs to be tackled early on as it can cause problems in later life. However, a number of areas in the region have no provisions to **facilitate early diagnosis**.

The Government response:

In September 2008, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence issued clinical guidelines on the diagnosis and care for people with ADHD. To ensure children have **access to early intervention and specialist services** the Government has increased investment in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS) by 62% between 2003/4 (£322m) and 2006/7 (£523m). In response to an independent Review of CAHMS in November 2008, the Government has established a National Advisory Council to act as a **champion for children and young people's mental health** and a National Support Programme for people and organisations providing children and young people's mental health services.

What the public thought:

Teachers should be trained to help them understand the issues regarding young people with ADHD and more support should be given to help those with ADHD stay in school.

The Government response:

In May 2008, the Government issued revised guidance on educating children with behavioural special educational needs. It has also commissioned a series of professional development materials to **give the school workforce greater confidence** in addressing special educational needs (SEN).

In 2008, these materials focussed on communications difficulties and dyslexia and will focus on autism in 2009, and behavioural difficulties, including some specific material on ADHD, in 2010. The Education and Skills Act 2008 means that *all* young people will participate in education or training to age 17 from 2013, and to 18 from 2015.

Underage drinking

What the public thought:

Underage drinking leads to teenage health problems and worklessness. Current public awareness initiatives such as the '*You wouldn't start your evening like this*' campaign have been effective but more needs to be done to tackle the problem.

The Government response:

The Government is fully committed to tackling under-age drinking. It aims to **raise awareness of the risks** associated with alcohol consumption among parents, carers and young people and give parents/carers advice that empowers them to set clear boundaries with young people.

The Government will soon be starting a **public consultation process** based around the Chief Medical Officers' Guidance on the consumption of alcohol by children and young people. We are also reviewing PSHE education (which includes alcohol) as well as rolling-out six alcohol-arrest referral pilots so that young people arrested for any alcohol-related offence can benefit from an intervention from a trained worker.

Addiction support

What the public thought:

Support for drug addiction is relatively easy to access in the inner cities but it can be very hard to **access in rural areas and more affluent areas** where the topic isn't discussed.

Funding should **focus on the treatment of drug users** rather than on testing, particularly as habitual users and those involved in drug-related crime are already well-known to various public and third-sector bodies.

The Government response:

In 1998 the Government made a commitment to **double the numbers in drug treatment** by 2008, regardless of where they lived. This commitment has been met. In 2007/08, over 202,000 people received treatment, up from 85,000 in 1998. The provision of local NHS services, including drug treatment services, is the responsibility of local Primary Care Trusts, supported by funding and guidance from the Government. Since 2001, we have provided **dedicated resources** to local partnerships for drug treatment, with £398m provided in 2007/08.

13. Crime and Justice

Economic downturn

What the public thought:

There is a concern that the economic downturn will **aggravate the drivers of crime**, especially prolific offenders who will be particularly affected by the credit crunch.

The Government response:

The Government does not agree with those who say a downturn means crime will rise. Having already delivered a **40% reduction in crime since 1997**, the Government and its partners are much better placed to tackle crime than in the past. We are determined to **maintain this record**, focusing particularly on the people who cause the greatest concern in hard times. To keep burglary and other thefts down, for example, there will be a summit with the Police, Neighbourhood Watch, Age Concern and DIY stores. This will be followed by a burglary campaign and a Home Office fund dedicated to helping people in hard times.

Prisons

What the public thought:

Conditional release dates for prisoners are spread evenly throughout the week but those with dates which fall on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday are all released from prison on the Friday. This means released prisoners often arrive back too late to **access support services** (e.g. drug, medical and homelessness). This can lead to drug abuse and rough sleeping over the first weekend.

The Government response:

Prisoners whose release dates fall on weekends or Bank Holidays are released on the preceding working day rather than the next working day as it is **unlawful** to detain a prisoner beyond his or her statutory release date. Prisons make every effort to arrange accommodation, drug support, medical and probation appointments for prisoners before they are released. They are then **released early in the day** to allow them to reach their discharge address.

Domestic violence

What the public thought:

There is a fear of reporting domestic violence, so we need to make it more socially acceptable to talk about it. Extra support should be given to women who enter the country on a **spouse visa** and whose marriage breaks down as a result of domestic violence as they currently have no entitlement to support.

The Government response:

The Government takes violence against women very seriously and is committed to tackling it in all its forms. A **new scheme** is being developed for victims of domestic violence with no recourse to public funds, whose applications for Indefinite Leave to Remain are successful. This will change the way that domestic violence cases are considered, enabling vulnerable victims to access additional support. The Government will also be launching a consultation for a strategy on violence against women which will engage the public and **raise awareness** of this serious issue.

Justice and Coroner Reform Bill

What the public thought:

How do we **avoid a postcode lottery** for Coroner services if Local Authorities retain financial responsibility? Is there any scope for ring-fencing the funding?

The Government response:

This January, the Government introduced the Coroners and Justice Bill. This will create a Chief Coroner, with the same status as a High Court Judge, who will establish **national standards of service**. Coroners will therefore operate more consistently across England and Wales, while the Chief Coroner will be able to deal with Local Authorities who do not provide the national standard of funding that enables coroners to deliver the service bereaved families are entitled to. The Government, however, maintains its view that Local Authorities should be responsible for their own spending decisions.

What the public thought:

Is there scope for **early consultation** with local coroners and other key stakeholders on the forthcoming Bill?

The Government response:

Stakeholders, including coroners, voluntary organisations and local authorities were **consulted extensively** prior to the Bill's introduction. They were also informed of the content of the Bill as well as the latest position on related issues, such as sensitive reporting in coroners' courts. The Government will continue to update stakeholders as the Bill progresses through Parliament.

14. The Third Sector

Funding levels

What the public thought:

More use could be made of the Third Sector during the current economic downturn as it plays a **vital role** in working with those most likely to be affected. But is there a danger that their funding levels will be reduced?

The Government response:

The current state of the economy is creating a number of challenges, but the sector is in a good position to meet them. Third Sector income from the Government has doubled over the last 11 years to a total of **£11 billion a year**. The Pre-Budget Report also confirmed the importance of the sector to the economy and society. It announced a number of measures accessible to the sector, including: debt advice, a small Business Finance Scheme and a free 'health check' via Business Link. The Government's economic action plan will consider how the Third Sector's involvement in public services can be supported and developed in the current economic climate.

What the public thought:

The economic downturn has led to a huge increase in the demand for voluntary sector services (including drug, alcohol and mental health support as well as debt and employment advice). However, the sector has also seen a **drop in funding** as Lottery and EU funds decline or are channelled elsewhere. As a relatively modest public investment could bring huge benefits in terms of preventative support work, could **Local Authorities** fill the gap?

The Government response:

The Government is developing a cross-Government Action Plan to support the Third Sector during the economic downturn. This will be published shortly. It recognises that in the current economic climate, Local Authorities need to **change their priorities** and it encourages them to do so in line with Compact principles. The Government is also developing a 'transitional package' of initiatives under the **Supporting People programme**. This supports preventative action at the local level to help some of society's most vulnerable and socially excluded people live independently.

Commissioning

What the public thought:

New commissioning requirements can restrict opportunities for the Third Sector. How do we maintain commissioning rigour while encouraging the involvement of more **flexible, community-based organisations**?

The Government response:

The Government aims to create a **level playing field** in the commissioning of public services. Our National Programme for Third Sector Commissioning, for example, provides training to improve the performance of up to 3,000 public sector commissioners. The commitment to working with the Third Sector is also shown by the fact that in 62% of Local Authorities, Local Strategic Partnerships have chosen to prioritise one of the Third sector indicators in their Local Area Agreements.

15. Making Government work better

Joined-up policy

What the public thought:

Government departments are clearly trying to work more closely together across Whitehall but unless policy is fully joined-up, it can **be difficult to implement** operationally at a local level.

The Government response:

The Government recognises the need for departments to work closely together on complex, local issues. This is reflected in the **30 Public Service Agreements (PSA)** we are collectively working towards. These require departments to link their work across organisational boundaries, levels of government and sectors. Local Area Agreements (LAAs) play a key role in supporting joined-up delivery locally and reflect an agreed set of national and local priorities.

Public service indicators

What the public thought:

Top-down performance management indicators may produce big improvements in the delivery of public services at first. Over time, however, they can **distort service delivery** away from 'real' concerns to those that are most visible in terms of measurable targets.

The Government response:

Tough minimum standards have delivered **significant improvements** to public services. In 1997 for example, 280,000 NHS patients waited over six months for an inpatient appointment. Today, 95 per cent of patients wait less than 18 weeks. Where performance has improved, the Government is now moving to free up frontline professionals to use their skills and experience to enhance services based on **local priorities**. This approach is embodied in the new Public Service Agreement framework and Local Area Agreements where the number of targets has been drastically reduced and the focus is on the outcomes which matter most to citizens.

Machinery of government

What the public thought:

The Government should **focus on managing the economic downturn** and stop making major changes to the machinery of government.

The Government response:

Changes to the machinery of government ensure the Government is organised to **meet current challenges**. The new Department of Energy and Climate Change, for example, was created to respond to the challenges of decarbonising the economy and ensuring energy security. Such changes are, however, relatively infrequent and the Government is fully focussed on taking action to get through the current economic difficulties.

Information access

What the public thought:

The number of Government channels and information access points could be simplified and made more effective.

The Government response:

The Government is working on **streamlining its digital channels**, developing access points that focus on the needs of their relevant user communities. These include Directgov for citizens, Businesslink for business and a range of workforce specific channels. Clear direction will come from a smaller number of definitive, trusted sources.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender statistics

What the public thought:

The **lack of statistics** on sexuality means that it is very difficult to justify funding for lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) and transgender causes. Can the Government consider including an optional question on sexuality in the next national consensus in 2011?

The Government response:

The Government recognises the potential value of such information. However, we support the view of the UK Statistics Authority that believes a compulsory census is not a suitable way of collecting sexual identity information for the first time. Instead, questions on sexual identity have been introduced into the Office for National Statistics' major continuous surveys **from January 2009**. This will make estimates available well before the 2011 Census. Survey estimates will be updated annually, enabling regular monitoring of the size, distribution and changing profile of the LGB population. Transgender identity is not included in the new survey question but work is currently being done to develop an approach to obtain appropriate information.

Media

What the public thought:

By significantly increasing the public's access to information, the internet has raised expectations and made people more demanding. The media can manipulate this fact, often reflecting news in a negative way. The Government needs to **use language that people understand** to get the right message across and make people feel more secure.

The Government response:

The Government strongly believes that a media free from state intervention is fundamental to democracy. The **principle of freedom of expression** needs to be maintained. Political interference could undermine it. The Government does not therefore seek to interfere in broadcast programme matters or in what a newspaper or magazine chooses to publish in any way. Ofcom, the BBC Trust and the S4C are independent of the Government and responsible for safeguarding the public interest in broadcasting. With the press it is the Press Complaints Commission.

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