

RESPONSE TO THE GOVERNMENT'S DRAFT LEGISLATIVE PROGRAMME: "PREPARING BRITAIN FOR THE FUTURE"

The Regional Forum is the strategic organisation for the voluntary and community sector (VCS), in the Yorkshire and Humber region. The Forum promotes and supports the contribution of the VCS in improving the quality of life for people, and especially those who are disconnected from society and the economy, or who live in disadvantaged communities across our region.

1. THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

The Regional Forum supports measures to open up the process of government. We therefore welcome the decision to break with established tradition and publish the draft legislative programme (DLP) for comment. We have some observations to make regarding the consultation process itself.

- It is clear that decisions have already been made about the "core" direction of Government policy. We question how far it is realistic to expect that views expressed in this consultation will result in substantive changes to the main themes and legislation contained in the Queen's Speech.
- The proposed legislation is, in most cases, described in very general terms. This makes it difficult to respond with anything more than general comments.
- There are some areas in the draft programme where the Government's aims and objectives are less than clear, and would benefit from clarification. In some cases they may even be in conflict. We have identified these in the text.

2. THE THEMES

Economic Stability

- It is obviously important to ensure that we steer the economy and our people through the global economic downturn, and this should clearly be a priority. However, we are concerned that, as is always the case during times of economic hardship, it will be those in our society who are already disadvantaged who will suffer the most. We would have liked the

DLP to reflect a more urgent focus on lifting people out of poverty, and to identify specific measures to help those who are most at risk.

- We welcome recognition, contained in the DLP, of the crucial role the third sector has in helping to tackle the consequences of economic disadvantage, and we would encourage the government to continue to engage the sector in the ongoing process of policy development.

Making the most of your Potential

- The Regional Forum shares and supports the Government's vision of building a fairer and more equal society, so that the benefits of economic growth are available to all. However, we question whether the proposed legislation, (welcome though it is), will be bold enough to deliver this vision.
- We believe that the focus should be on supporting people to get into employment and out of poverty, and we think the Government needs to be clear about how the proposed Welfare Reform Bill will achieve this in a way which genuinely reaches out to individuals who are marginalised and who lack basic life skills. VCS organisations can help to do this. We also have a concern about some of the current rhetoric and tone surrounding this legislation; it gives the **impression** that the Welfare Reform Bill is really just about "getting tough", and "tightening up".

Personalised and Improved Public Services.

- Most people want public services to be as good as they can be, but we believe that the concept of 'personalisation' would benefit from greater clarification, and public debate surrounding the issues, particularly in terms of (a) what "being in control" actually means? and (b) how far this is realistic and achievable?
- The Government needs to show how the 'personalisation' agenda sits with the concept of 'community'. Many of the challenges society faces have their solutions in mutual cooperation. They have to meet the needs of communities otherwise this agenda will further marginalise the disadvantaged and disconnected in society.
- The VCS is closer to users of public services and has shown that it has the capacity to respond to individual needs whilst at the same time working at the heart of communities. It can provide joined up thinking and innovative solutions but must be engaged at the design as well as at the delivery stage by public agencies.
- The current trend towards larger contracts and tenders in the commissioning and procurement environment makes the possibility of meeting specialised individual needs more difficult as this is most likely to be achievable through smaller local grants. The Government should consider how its policies around 'personalisation' are reflected in the funding landscape.

Handing Power back to the People

- The Regional Forum fully supports the vision of transferring more ‘power’ back to people, but we believe that our comments in the last section relating to the need for greater clarity in the DLP are also relevant here. This is really about whether the rhetoric can/will be turned into reality at every level of the governance process. The Forum will be responding to specific proposals contained in the Empowerment White Paper, but we have a number of initial observations to make.
- There is currently a gap between the way in which Government believes processes to be working and what is actually happening ‘on the ground’. For example, ‘Community Empowerment Networks’ are under threat from reduced funding because this is now being allocated by Local Authorities via Local Area Agreements. The ‘Duty to Involve’ provides the legislative backdrop but it is not always happening in practice.
- The VCS must be a key strategic partner in terms of Neighbourhood Management but has to have the necessary independence and capacity to work effectively in communities. Local Authorities have to deliver services but need VCS expertise to engage people in the decision making process. This is particularly important where local priorities are not being articulated through established local authority structures.
- We believe that Parish Councils should have more power and status regarding Planning issues. Many are involved in the production of Parish Plans; they should not be impotent when it comes to influencing planning applications.

Sustainable Development

The Regional Forum has a broader concern about the need to provide a coherent and joined up approach to development in the draft legislative programme. The recent Sub National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration does not, in our view, provide the necessary synergy between the Economic, Environmental, and Social imperatives. The proposed abolition of the Regional Assemblies poses serious questions about the future arrangements for engaging with these issues at regional level. This lack of engagement, already an issue for the VCS in some places at local level, could seriously undermine the potential for Government legislation to deliver on its laudable objectives.

23rd July 2008

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