

## **Prepare short paper on trends and policy issues in relation to service provision in market towns, eg centralization versus community empowerment and localism**

Since the Millennium central government policy has increasingly focused on localism, citizen and customer engagement, and public service delivery. All political parties are now trying to outdo each other in an attempt to be more relevant and more engaged with local communities. With a General Election around the corner David Cameron has promised to devolve significant powers to councils against the background of perceived sleaze in Westminster. The Communities and Local Government Select Committee recently called for a general power of competence, going further than the Government's power of well-being. The Conservatives have promised to put such a 'general power of competence', permitting any powers provided they are legal, into effect. Critics however point to the lack of detail in the Conservatives plans for local government, particularly on financing local government services.

Those operating public services at the sharp edge have been torn by a confused muddle of imperatives to centralise or decentralise for the past few years. The mantra within the public sector for at least 20 years has been a constant demand for value for money. Efficiencies have been made at all levels, and many public sector organisations have now reached the point at which squeezing until something gives will no longer work. And of course once this point is reached, the logical way to look for further savings is actually to scale up, hence the many initiatives across local government for shared services, partnership agreements, and even shared local authority chief executives and management teams.

From a central government perspective there has been a focus on local government reorganisation in order to achieve savings and offer 'better value for money for local people'. Similarly a reorganisation of Primary Care Trusts, and a failed attempt to implement the same for Police Authorities, has resulted in a confusion of local public service boundaries which are no longer coterminous.

The new performance assessment for localities, Comprehensive Area Assessment, contains organisational assessments for individual public service organisations, as well as an area wide assessment. These same organisations are held to account within the Local Area Agreement to drive up performance against a series of locally set priorities (although there are also some national priorities which have to be reflected). These Local Area Agreements set "stretch targets" for delivery of specified outcomes agreed with central government. For many there is concern that Local Area Agreement delivery – which is measured across a county area - will be concentrated in the county and larger population towns (where delivery is both easier and less costly) at the expense of more remote Market Towns and their hinterlands where proportionate impact will not be achieved.

In future years it will be interesting to observe how the imperative for vfm might develop within partnerships with the potential for back office shared services across public sector organisations.

Potentially with a concentration of power and resources at a much higher and arguably more remote level, the debate increasingly is about how 'local' is localism. If you ask a member of the public about the area to which they most readily identify, this will vary from an individual street or estate, to part of a small town, up to a region of Britain. Everyone has a different definition of 'local', and the relevance of the area of measurement can depend on the service being discussed, the context in which it is discussed or the community of interest concerned. Tracking the results of service satisfaction as expressed through the "Place Survey" with service deliverers' views and priorities is likely to throw up some significant issues for discussion.

At the extreme of the concept of localism, the government increasingly expects public services to deliver individual or personalised services to citizens in order to target tailored solutions to individual need. Highly developed commissioning skills are now increasingly needed from public officials rather than the more traditional procurement skills. Getting value for money is key, but harder when predictions of need and quantities of scale are in constant flux throughout the year.

Against this policy background, market towns have continued to develop, sustained by the support and enthusiasm of local public, private, voluntary and community agencies. In many areas, drivers for economic and social solutions have come from the forgotten layer of local government – town and parish councils; many of these emasculated former boroughs from the last significant local government reorganisation in 1974.

Market towns in many areas have particularly benefited from the drive to open one stop customer service centres, with many public services conveniently housed in one location, often with extended opening hours. More recently, fortunes have changed with a withdrawal of service provision ranging from post offices to NHS dentists. Many market towns which had seen a renaissance in café and evening culture, have seen the recession start to bite with the closure of facilities and the removal of many well known high street names which had performed a function as significant as any public service in providing clothing or footwear for generations of families.

In the future increased involvement and empowerment is promised for local communities. However with a public who are increasingly cynical about public institutions and public representatives, and who are reticent to utilize people power, it remains to be seen how the power play for local vs centralized services and resources will ultimately play out particularly when the expected severe public expenditure cuts for future years are factored in. Market Towns and rural areas generally will need to be ready to articulate their role in Sustaining Rural Communities and in arguing for a fair share of available public resources – with changes to central funding formulae to reflect the true cost of providing services in the rural context.