



BRIEFING

‘Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter’

This discussion document accompanies ‘Sustainable Communities; People, Places and Prosperity’ part of a five year plan from the ODPM. Government is challenged with declining citizen engagement with traditional democratic processes, economic changes and rising public expectations. It needs to secure sustainable improvements in public services and promote citizen involvement in government institutions. It aims to do this by ensuring that public services are more effective and responsive to the needs of users.

The wide availability of neighbourhood-level arrangements is key to their response. These are the ways that local neighbourhoods can influence local services from *ad hoc* meetings in response to local developments to devolved responsibility for delivering services. As people identify with different types of neighbourhoods, *“neighbourhoods will be essentially self-determined by the people who live in them”*. However, the *“pivotal”* role of democratically elected local councillors means that *“the ward will often be a key unit of area in establishing and maintaining any neighbourhood arrangements”*. Local Authorities will *“provide leadership in developing arrangements for neighbourhood engagement working with other service providers and community organisations.”*

A national framework statement for neighbourhoods is being developed, combining a statement by local partners on principles for neighbourhood arrangements and provisions about *“when and how people in neighbourhoods can act”*. Guiding principles identified include:

- All Local Authorities, together with service providers, should provide opportunities and support for neighbourhood arrangements.
- Neighbourhood arrangements must be able to make a real difference to people’s lives and be developed in response to local circumstances and the diversity of the community.
- Neighbourhood Arrangements need to be consistent with local representative democracy, working with existing decision-making frameworks and local councillors rather than alongside them.

- Where they have a bearing on decisions about local priorities and spending decisions, arrangements must be accountable and ensure that resources are managed in a way that benefits the neighbourhood.

Detail about “*when and how people in neighbourhoods can act*” is set to include clarity on a range of issues from standards for neighbourhood bodies, to working with voluntary and community organisations.

A neighbourhoods charter will set out what local people should expect from providers (clean and safe neighbourhoods etc) and clarify what opportunities there are for people to get involved in shaping services. Decided between local partners, these could include giving local communities ownership of local assets, by-laws and powers to offer penalty notices to deal with problems like anti-social behaviour, powers to raise funds and devolved budgets for communities to manage services. A ‘menu of options’ may accompany charters, offering further ideas for neighbourhood arrangements.

Neighbourhood arrangements should be supported by making use of existing money. Where they need dedicated funds, it is for Local Authorities and their partners to agree what is available. How much control the neighbourhood has over budgets will vary and appropriate levels of control will be put in place where they are responsible for funding.

Proposed efforts to improve the capacity of local people to become involved in neighbourhood arrangements include the development of a neighbourhood statistics service, training and practical support and opportunities for sharing experience and ideas. Support will need to be accessible and open to people from more marginalised communities. The discussion paper ‘*Vibrant Local Leadership*’ sets out the support that will be offered to build the capacity of Local Councillors and public sector officers.

Government says it is seeking an open debate on the future of Neighbourhood Arrangements and hopes for feedback from the VCS.

Further details and the full report can be found at www.odpm.gov.uk