

SEL's Response to the Government's White Paper on Local Government

We welcome the first steps Government is making towards devolution of power to local authorities. Looking more critically at some of the more essential elements in the paper we immediately recognise that social enterprise as an instrument for more local involvement has, and continues to be, demonstrated through the variety of community businesses, co-operatives, credit unions, social firms located in London. In this respect the marriage between social enterprise and strengthening local communities is a good one and one that should be explored further by local government.

Forums such as LA Connects, developed by SEL in partnership with the London Councils, is the only sizeable UK forum to a) draw together all local authority officers in London to share and exchange best practice in social enterprise and b) to develop a coordinated approach to developing it. Consultations with this group would be essential for the development of locally driven models of service delivery. Additionally, as a regional membership agency for social enterprise in London we are keen for our members to be involved in the development of their local communities.

SEL welcomes the recommendations for stable funding. As the White Paper has recognised, one year funding streams leave organisations such as social enterprises unable to create long-term business strategies. The creation of a three-year grant settlement will allow third sector organisations to adequately plan to bid for contracts with the local authorities and thereby become financially sustainable. Key to all this activity will be the way that local authorities and social enterprises engage with each other to ensure that best value is provided within local authority contracts.

The Community Call for Action (CCFA) put forward in the White Paper, can be seen as a forward step to bringing down the barriers that exist between communities and the local authority. If CCFA can be used effectively to, for example, create tenant management organisations or to free up under-utilised buildings for community use, then this process can be seen as a positive move for community groups such as social enterprise. However, there is also a concern that all this change will lead to more confusion as new people enter this world of collaborative thinking between local authorities and social enterprises, unsure as to how to achieve their community goals. For example, by creating a community group tasked to reduce the level of street vandalism and graffiti, will this also allow the local authorities to move away from their responsibility for the safe keeping of public streets?

Local government policies are essential to communities. Local Area Agreements and Local Strategic Partnerships are in place within local authorities. While it is understandable that local strategic partnerships have to take into a diverse range of interests while not necessarily being able to include everyone in its membership, it is essential that social enterprise, as a part of the third sector is a part of these strategies.

The paper is committed to making local government decision-making easier and simpler and we welcome that in terms of ensuring actions happen on the ground, but we will have to ensure that this decision-making process resonates across political parties or else we will have pockets of change and no coordination.