

**Local Leadership and Public Trust:  
Openness and Accountability in Local Government**

**Response from Gateshead Council**

**Introduction**

1. This submission is a response from Gateshead Council to the Committee on Standards in Public Life: Openness and Accountability in Local Government. The main areas of focus in this response are:
  - Leadership and Decision Making
  - Openness and Accountability
  - Accountability and Partnerships

**Leadership and Decision Making**

*Visionary leadership*

2. Gateshead Council aims to make Gateshead a better place through visionary and inclusive leadership. We have a track record in vision and creativity through leadership. We have a track record in delivering results. Some of the examples of this are:
  - One of the top performing Councils in England – rated 4 star, improving strongly by the Audit Commission. Our Children’s Services, our Adult Services and our Housing Company are all best in England, rated the highest score, 3 Stars by the Audit Commission.
  - A track record in raising aspirations and confidence of local people through cultural regeneration – the Angel of the North; the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art; the Sage Gateshead.
  - Transformation of Gateshead Quays, attracting £500 Million public and private sector investment.
  - Unlocking the potential of our young people. The number of pupils receiving five A\* to C grades at GCSE has risen to 75%, making Gateshead the fourth best local authority in the country and the top performing council in the North East of England.
  - Taking the lead on adopting a Joint Waste Strategy with South Tyneside and Sunderland Councils to increase recycling, securing £73Million PFI credits.
  - Recently agreed a £200 Million ten point plan to make the Borough more resilient in this current economic climate and prepare for an economic up turn – part of this is a commitment for a Council owned Energy Company.

3. This leadership has been recognised by others:

*“Place-shaping can perhaps best be illustrated through an example of one particularly successful attempt to reshape a place in recent years, the regeneration of Gateshead.” Sir Michael Lyons (2007)*

### **Leadership – a model, a quality or a name?**

#### **Committee’s questions:**

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the new executive models of decision-making?
- Why are there so few elected mayors? Is there any evidence to support the hypothesis that an elected mayor can help rebuild public trust in a failing authority?
- How do different models of local governance in the UK compare with each other, and with practice in other countries, in terms of accountability and openness?

4. Gateshead Council’s experience and track record of leadership is one which is based on commitment to local people - making Gateshead a better place; listening to local people’s views and delivering excellent services.

*“The top level leadership provided to the council by the Leader and Chief Executive is widely recognised and respected, internally and externally of the council. At all levels there is clear commitment to make Gateshead a better place to live, work and do business.” IdeA Corporate Peer Review November 2008*

5. In Gateshead, we have taken difficult decisions and made hard choices in recognition of our role to provide leadership for the community of Gateshead. The same is true in many other authorities including in the big cities where strong leadership has transformed economic fortunes in recent years.

6. This has been achieved in Gateshead, by the quality of leadership and political stability. Gateshead Council does not believe that this is as a result of the model (Cabinet and Leader or Cabinet and Elected Mayor).

7. Most debates on the respective values of the new executive models of decision-making focus predominantly on the model, not on the qualities of leadership of the individual concerned, or the values placed on the name ‘Mayor’. It would be interesting to test whether a more widespread adoption of the term ‘Mayor’ and the associated profile that this brings, would address some of the concerns about profile and visibility of council leaders. It would also be interesting to compare and contrast the qualities of leadership, regardless of model. There has been too little attention paid, in our view, to determining whether it is

the simple use of the term 'Mayor' that can make a difference to public perception or if it is indeed the fact that they are directly elected.

8. We believe therefore that there is a further option to consider if we want to explore new ways of increasing the profile of local government, which lies between the council leader cabinet model, and the directly elected Mayor system – the potential to explore and test the widespread adoption of **indirectly elected mayors**.
9. Under this proposal **councils** would elect a Mayor to serve for a four year term: in essence, this is simply the new “strong leader” model introduced under the 2007 Act, but allowing the leader to take the title of “Mayor”. The position of the ceremonial Mayor (where relevant) would also be replaced with an alternative title, thereby avoiding any confusion in roles – it is hardly surprising that the public and international visitors and investors are confused by our system when the term 'Mayor' means such very different things in an area such as the north east region.
10. Extending the use of the title of Mayor in this way would, in our view, bring the same advantages in terms of clarity of leadership, and would bring a consistency in terminology for all local authorities as well as clarity to the electorate.
11. This type of approach has many parallels in Europe. In France, for example, each of the 36,000 communes has their own Mayor but their fellow councillors – even in Paris - elect them. Major figures such as Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy came to national prominence through the reputation they gained for strong visible leadership of their city - a leadership that was in fact based on indirect election. The same is true of Berlin and Barcelona, and throughout Sweden.
12. We believe there is a strong case to be made for this minor change to terminology in the legislation. If necessary, we would be interested in the potential to pilot this in the North East given our existing experiences with the elected mayor model in three of our authorities; our track record of excellence in public service provision and innovation; and our advantages in terms of scale which would make this a manageable pilot study area.
13. Such strong strategic leadership also needs to be matched by effective area and neighbourhood working to secure engagement and participation to achieve the empowerment agenda outlined in, amongst other documents, the recent Communities in Control White Paper. Here in Gateshead, we have developed a system of clear executive responsibility for our five areas and our local ward councillors are equipped with the necessary resources to fulfil their community champion roles.
14. The other area currently being considered is the process and criteria by which mayors are elected (eg reducing the threshold for a petition to trigger a governance referendum on a council's governance model; permitting e-petitioning for mayors; the appropriate timescale for a

moratorium once a governance referendum has been held). Gateshead Council has no particularly strong views on this – the overriding principles should be that of strong, visible leadership and a system that enables democracy that makes it easy to be heard and to influence.

## **Openness and accountability**

### ***Inclusive and empowered communities – scrutiny making a difference and improving services.***

Committee's Questions:

- What are the key elements of an effective accountability framework for local government, and how well do the arrangements work in practice?
- How should effective scrutiny be judged, and to what extent do current measures lead to effective scrutiny?
- How effectively have local authorities embedded a culture of scrutiny into their decision-making processes

15. The overview and scrutiny system in Gateshead provides clear advantages in terms of accountability and decision making. Our approach has always been based on the principle that scrutiny should not be seen in isolation from the policy and improvement framework - it is a critical element of it. The roles of Scrutiny Chair and Scrutiny Committee member compliment and add value to the overall decision-making architecture of the Council. We have invested considerable effort on ensuring that scrutiny committees are an integral part of the process of both holding the Executive to account, and as a key part of the policy development and service improvement process.

## **Accountability and partnerships**

Committee's Questions:

- How do partnerships ensure effective accountability and open decision-making?
- How do local authorities reconcile partnership working with the principle that individual public office holders should be accountable for their decisions and actions?

*“The vision and leadership shown by Gateshead Council has enabled the Gateshead Community Network to develop and grow as an equal partner within the Strategic Partnership structure. The real partnership that has developed between us means that the views, ideas and expertise of the community are valued and acted upon in a way that does not seem to happen in other areas and we feel privileged to be partners in both Vision 2030 and the Gateshead Agreement.”* Lynne Caffrey, Chair of Gateshead Community Network

16. Gateshead Council's approach to partnerships demonstrates both an ability to be clear about lines of accountability, and a commitment to strong partnership working.

17. Our approach to area working illustrates this. We restructured our Cabinet Portfolios resulting in five Area Portfolios and five Theme Portfolios - we believe that we are the only Council in England to work in this way. We have set up Area Forums in each of the five areas of the borough. Chaired by the Cabinet Member with responsibility for the relevant area portfolio, these enable public sector partners to redesign their services and pool resources in their area to meet local need and to deliver the Local Area Agreement – the Gateshead Agreement. The work of the Area Forums is supported by a number of new area management structures and associated arrangements such as shadow youth forums.
18. The Gateshead Strategic Partnership (our LSP) has existed since 1999. It is a mature partnership, built on trust and commitment (it has been consistently rated the highest score 'Green' by Government Office North East and was highly commended at the Local Government Chronicle Awards 2007).
19. Following a Peer Review, we restructured the Gateshead Strategic Partnership to create thematic partnerships based on the portfolios of the Council and the Local Area Agreement priorities. Cabinet members with responsibility for the relevant theme portfolios chair the theme partnerships. We believe that this provides the necessary clarity, consistency and accountability for our partnership work across the borough.
20. The Gateshead Strategic Partnership developed and owns the Sustainable Community Strategy, Vision 2030 and the LAA, the Gateshead Agreement. Through the Partnership structure, partners hold each other to account in delivering the LAA targets.
21. Performance of the LAA is monitored by the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committees. Partners and the Council jointly set the Scrutiny's Committees' work programmes and jointly agree to participate in scrutiny as required.
22. In terms of wider geographical partnerships, we are committed to contributing to the success of the region and have established the Gateshead and Newcastle Partnership in 2008. This Partnership provides strategic direction, political accountability and authority to drive the economic growth of Gateshead and Newcastle. We have also been instrumental in the development of the Tyne and Wear City Region Multi Area Agreement, which is led by the elected representatives of the local authorities through the City Region Interim Executive Board.
23. The Association of North East Councils also provides a clear and accountable mechanism for work at the regional level, and is playing a key role in designing appropriate structures for the region following the recent Sub National review of economic development and regeneration (the SNR).

## Conclusions

24. Gateshead Council considers that strong, visible leadership is key to local confidence and public trust. 80% of our residents think that Gateshead Council is making Gateshead a better place and 81% of our residents are satisfied with their local area.
25. We consider that the current decision-making framework and way in which we are held to account works. It is more effective where there is local flexibility and commitment to designing the system to suit localities. We consider that there is potential to test the impact of the term 'Mayor' (rather than the model). If appropriate, the Council would like the north east to pilot the use of the term 'Mayor' for both 'strong leaders' and directly elected mayors. The impact and outcomes will be evaluated across the north east (comparing differences between those areas with a Mayoral model and those without, and between directly and indirectly elected mayors).
26. Gateshead Council is interested in engaging further with the Inquiry, and would be particularly pleased to take part in the public hearing to be held in Newcastle on 5 May 2009.

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