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Blears' recipe to revitalise communities

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Blears takes a local rou

An Empowerment White Paper promises much for devolved government, responsive services and connecting with the people. Communities Secretary Hazel Blears tells **Lynda King Taylor** why it is vital that politics is made to work at ground level

Hazel Blears says she is proud to be part of a government making a reality of what the Prime Minister has called “a reinvention of the way we govern”, a shift in power and influence away from Whitehall, towards the town hall and local people.

The Communities and Local Government Secretary appreciates it is all very well seeking local accountability, but limited local funding and resource can leave many to chase their tails in finding third sector support or business backing to help make a difference in communities. She is keen to see local authorities and police set aside more money for people to decide on how it should be spent in their community.

Blears – petite, motorbike rider, MP for Salford where she was born and from where she emerged in the early '90s as chair of the community health council – is a politician who stays close to the ground. In October last year, her department published the Community Empowerment Action Plan (CEAP) setting out a series of concrete measures to put local people in the driving seat, to be followed this summer by an Empowerment White Paper towards encouraging more informed, empowered communities, more neighbourhood management, and more responsive services.

In opening the channels to stronger local democracy, she shuns the “participatory budgeting” parlance, preferring the more down-to-earth “community kitties”. This is a tool, she says which “gives people a real and direct say on how funds are allocated, and helps them to take more ownership of their neighbourhood, to feel able to say ‘this is my street, my estate and I’m proud of it’”.

CEAP starts a consultation on the next steps: “How we turn ambition into practical change that people can see and feel,” she says. “As with so many aspects of our daily democracy, local government, voluntary groups and others working in the field are ultimately the people who can make community kitties a success.” Blears wants to hear from the people: Has government set out the right

measures? Is it proposing the right incentives? Are there other issues or barriers it needs to consider?

She insists it is also the key to finding many of today’s big political solutions: “It is the best way to make sure public services genuinely meet people’s needs, the surest way to encourage grass-roots activism and civic volunteering that enriches our communities.”

Her desire is for local people to “feel connected” to the way decisions are made. “At the moment less than 40 per cent of people actually feel they can influence or shape what goes on,” she admits. “Many feel a disengagement with the political process, often feeling ‘that’s nothing to do with me, that’s what happens at the town hall or Parliament’. I want to show people that they can have a say. They may not of course be able to determine everything. But if they have a problem in their neighbourhood – whether antisocial behaviour, gangs, litter, graffiti, bins left unemptied – they feel they can do something about it. People become frustrated when they are against a brick wall and goodwill is lost when they want to do their bit.”

Blears highlights 20 areas across the country from Salford to Sunderland that are “already demonstrating excellent practice, where instead of local councils deciding on priorities, the community has, say, £100,000 to decide on its own priorities, engaging people on decisions about issues which really matter, from environmental services, street improvements, to mending potholes, measures to discourage crime. I would like to see in every local authority a commitment to developing community kitties in different places, rural and urban, large and small. I have even spoken with the Home Office to see if some of the policing monies could be used as well”. Her government ambition is for every local authority area to “give people a real say over public budgets by 2012”.

She believes such investments as the Working Neighbourhoods Fund make a difference, especially when accompanied by the government’s £2bn New Deal for Communities programme. It com-

bats multiple deprivation by “giving some of our poorest communities the resources to tackle problems in an intensive and coordinated way”. The aim is to bridge the gap between these neighbourhoods and the rest of England.

A recent evaluation, she says, has been “very encouraging; crime and fear of crime have gone down; an 11 per cent increase in youngsters getting five decent GCSEs; smoking has gone down and importantly more people in the New Deal for Communities’ areas are more satisfied with their services – going up from 60 to 71 per cent. Things are improving. I feel strongly that while crime, education and health have improved, we still have not covered the worklessness problem – that is often generational.

“Homes, education and jobs are fundamental to a secure future bringing respect and structure to lives. Help people with these and they can better get on with their own lives.

“We have to build communities from all different backgrounds, especially with increasing immigration from Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Many rural communities have not experienced this influx before. We have to see what unites people, get them learning English. Existing communities can get fearful and retreat into their own world. The impact has to be managed and be fairer... My experience is then communities are pretty welcoming.”

Blears wants to remove bureaucratic hurdles to create a more efficient planning process giving communities more say in faster decision-making for larger projects. The Planning Reform Bill aims to change how UK delivers major infrastructure, but Blears wants a system that is “more democratic, and with better quality design for homes and public spaces; greener, more efficient, user friendly”. She adds: “With new eco towns we cannot repeat past mistakes.”

She is keen to dispel alarm that local democracy is being by-passed by the new planning proposals, denying that this is more centralised government. In the old system, an application for a power station or airport could take 10 years



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BIKER BLEARS: “if politicians are going to have any credibility, get out of Whitehall, hear what people say”

...“The country cannot function like that – decisions should go through a streamlined process,” she says. “When a developer has an idea for a new road, motorway or town, there should be a new stage where they have to consult with the public before they put forward the proposal. Instead of waiting till it gets controversial and into an inquiry, you involve the public straight away at the front of the process. I want better public involvement and influence in these big projects.”

Part of the reform review, she says, is about asking: “How can we ensure the public has a proper say but without it taking forever, with people frustrated by the bureaucracy. There should be more

consultation online and to see how an application is progressing.” She has doubled funding for Planning Aid, a scheme that helps the individual, rather than pressure groups, find a voice in the system.

Blears sees benefits in transferring community assets. “Where a village hall, for instance, has been run down by a council or is not functioning, why shouldn’t the council transfer that to a community group for them to run? This gives more sense of local responsibility for amenities,” she says.

The threatened closure of post offices is not all doom and gloom. “People haven’t grasped that if all the closures happen there would still be 11,500 post offices, which is more than all the banks, building societies and supermarkets – a lot of post

offices left,” she says, and is encouraged by local councils thinking about ways they could provide more of their services through a post office.

“There are about 40 councils looking if they could have a post office in one of their outlets. I am also keen for local people being in a co-operative, owning their local shop or post office.”

It is fundamentally important for politicians to “stay in touch with people on the ground”. She was late for my interview as her London bus was delayed – she listened to the moans of fellow passengers. “If politicians are going to have any credibility whatsoever, get out of Whitehall,” she advises. “Hear what people say, then reflect that in your policy-making.”



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