

Hail to the people TV's *Citizen Smith* led a one-man campaign to change the world



The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health (LGPIH) Bill currently going through parliament will put Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) centre stage in the life of local communities across the country. Yet, most people have never heard of them.

Representative democracy is in crisis. Low voting levels, poor-quality councillors and low levels of public trust in public services.

Local people do not see the point in voting for councils which do not have the power to change their local area.

The Government provides most of the money for them, and dictates much of what they do.

Local police and health bodies are not accountable to local people, most of whom do not understand the complex web of agencies that run local areas.

Both problems might be overcome by having public elections for the LSP, and by allowing people to make decisions on local priorities, services and budgets. The LGPIH makes LSPs responsible for the area's Sus-

key issues it faces, and would lead the LSP

- there would be direct public elections for neighbourhood councillors, who would form the bulk of the 'backbench' membership of the LSP
- the role of neighbourhood councillors would be to act as advocates for their neighbourhood and to scrutinise the mayor/LSP executive
- the LSP would thus replace the existing elected local councils, health and police authorities
- there would be reserved places on the LSP for the private/business and community/voluntary sector, including one for each on the executive, although both sectors would need to have their infrastructure strengthened considerably
- these reserved places would be filled by election, directly by the public and/or through a sector forum. The measures above would result in a powerful local body, clearly responsible for everything which mattered in a local area, directly responsible to the public – with an overall mayor at the top and named individuals on all

Power to the local people

tainable Community Strategy (SCS) and Local Area Agreement (LAA). The new Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) from 2009 will have an assessment of the capacity and effectiveness of the LSP, and its annual self-assessment of its achievements, at its heart.

Yet LSPs are a weird hybrid. They are responsible for everything in the local area – yet are not elected and unaccountable to local citizens.

The council remains the only democratically-elected element of the LSP, yet it is only responsible for a minority of local services.

At a stroke, many of the problems outlined above could at least partially be addressed by making LSPs the elected local body, rather than the

Local Strategic Partnerships are gathering more and more responsibility – but lack democratic accountability.

Should they be elected, asks **Davy Jones?**

council. How might this be done? Here are some examples:

- LSPs should be made statutory, with the power to raise local taxes and commission the full range of local services, with a clear focus on improving people's lives and achieving value for money
- all those in the LSP and providing local services – including private and

voluntary sector providers – should have a duty to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of their local area

- the LSP should have overall responsibility for all aspects of the quality of life and services in the local area – through the SCS and LAA)
- in each LSP area, there would be direct public elections for a mayor and key LSP executive posts, likely to be around the key themes of the LAA, eg, environment, community safety, public health, etc, and for key community groups, eg, young people, older citizens, and black and minority ethnic communities
- the mayor and executive members would be directly responsible to the public for the area overall, and for the

the key local issues well-known to local citizens.

LSPs might be renamed Local Strategic Councils (LSCs) to more clearly identify that they were the directly-elected local body.

The election of LSPs would work best if other policy reforms were introduced, such as proportional representation, local income and land taxes. In particular, the introduction of participatory budgeting in every local area would allow citizens to make real choices about local priorities, services and budgets in the LAA and SCS. ■

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