



Government Response to the
Communities and Local
Government Committee's Report
on the Department of
Communities and Local
Government's Annual Report
2006

May 2007



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Presented to Parliament by
the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government
by Command of Her Majesty
May 2007

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INTRODUCTION

1. We welcome the Select Committee's scrutiny of our Departmental Annual Report for 2005-06 and further constructive and helpful conclusions and recommendations. We have considered the Committee's concerns seriously.

RESPONSE TO THE COMMITTEE'S CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

We are grateful to Ministers and officials for their willingness to make themselves available throughout the 2005-06 session.

2. The Department is committed to working constructively with the Select Committee and values the productive working relationship we have developed with them.

THE DEPARTMENT AND THE COMMITTEE

Recommendation 2

We note with some concern that senior departmental officials sometimes gave the appearance of being under-prepared for detailed scrutiny. We understand that they intended to discuss this at their post meeting debriefing session and look forward to seeing what impact that discussion has on future evidence sessions.

3. The Department's aim is to provide a helpful and clear account of its policies and their implementation to Parliament. We have reviewed our systems and working arrangements to reflect the Committee's concern.

Recommendation 3

We welcome the Department's active response to our criticisms regarding the clarity and usefulness of its explanatory memorandum on the Winter Supplementary Estimates, although it is unacceptable that this occurred only after repeated requests for clearer information. We are grateful for the Secretary of State's personal commitment to ensure that Parliament is kept as fully informed as possible. We expect to see more suitable, informative and comprehensible explanatory memoranda for all future Estimates and we shall return to this matter should they prove unsatisfactory.

4. The Department takes the Committee's comments about the need for improvements to the explanatory memorandum to the Estimates very seriously. As the Committee notes in their report, we co-operated fully with their request for a revised, more informative version of the memorandum, and with help from the Scrutiny Unit, made this available two days before the House debated and voted on the Winter Supplementary Estimates. Since then, we have made every effort to make improvements to subsequent explanatory memoranda.

Recommendation 4

We are concerned that the Department missed its deadline for Annual Report publication by more than two months. We are unconvinced that DCLG's creation on 8 May 2006 should significantly have affected a document intended for publication only four days later. We note the Permanent Secretary's intention to publish the 2007 report on time and will expect a full explanation if that is not achieved.

5. We are today publishing this year's Departmental Annual Report on time. Alongside the report, we have sent members of the Select Committee a memorandum setting out the changes we have made to this year's report, many of which build on previous comments by the Committee.

THE FORMAT AND QUALITY OF THE ANNUAL REPORT

Recommendation 5

We are concerned that the Department for a time gave, perhaps inadvertently, the impression that it was unwilling to answer parliamentary questions relating to its predecessor, the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. We are pleased that the Secretary of State moved immediately to issue new guidance when we drew the issue to her attention.

6. The Department and its Ministers take their obligations to Parliament seriously.

7. The reissued guidance states that:

“Parliamentary Question answers must be accurate, truthful, as concise as possible and in accordance with the guidance on disproportionate cost. Each question should be considered on its merits and there is no prohibition on providing information relating to the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister”

8. We have provided information on the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in a number of recent parliamentary answers. However, in accordance with Government wide guidance, there are occasions when the Department is not able to provide information, for example where the cost of preparing an answer, including staff time, is likely to exceed £700. In these cases, it is judged that the question can only be answered at disproportionate cost. A full explanation must be provided to Ministers justifying why it is proposed that preparing an answer should constitute a disproportionate cost.

Recommendation 6

We are pleased to note that the Department has taken significant steps to make its Annual Report clearer and more accessible to the general reader, including the provision of a useful new annex allowing comparison between high-level goals and strategic priorities. We recommend that the Department continue to develop new means of clarifying the connections between its Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets and the resources allocated to their achievement.

9. We are pleased that the Committee feel that the 2006 report was clearer and more accessible. We hope that they will find the 2007 report builds on this and reflects the Committee's helpful comments on how we can improve the clarity and quality of the report.

10. This year, we have again structured the report around our existing strategic priorities. We hope this continuity makes it easier for the Committee to track our activities and expenditure over time. To provide greater clarity on the connections between the strategic objectives, our PSA targets and the resources allocated them, we have brought the information together in the main body of the report. The changes in the structure of the report have been set out in a memorandum sent to Committee members.

Recommendation 7

We are disappointed, following our criticism of the accuracy of the Department's 2005 Annual Report, by the considerable number of minor errors allowed to appear in the 2006 document, several of which render statistical information inaccurate or out of date. We are unclear about what was done to fulfil the Department's 2005 promise to take action. The appearance of the final document is, bluntly, sub-standard. We strongly recommend that the Department take active steps to ensure careful proof checking, particularly of financial tables and charts. The failure to make significant improvements in this regard implies a lack of commitment on the part of the Department towards the duty of explaining its activities and achievements to Parliament and the public.

11. We take very seriously our obligations to account to Parliament and always aim to provide helpful, clear and accurate information. We accept the Committee's criticisms about last year's report. We have worked hard to ensure this year's report is accurate, clear and well presented. We have also carried out internal checks to ensure the data is accurate and consistent.

DELIVERY

Recommendation 8

The DCLG has undergone a substantial Transformation Programme since publication of the Annual Report. We shall, in the course of our programme of inquiries into Departmental policies, watch with interest the impact that this has on the Department's roles, responsibilities and achievements. We expect next year's Annual Report to include at least a preliminary analysis of the impact these changes have had on the Department's ability to deliver.

12. The Department's 2007 Annual Report sets out the progress we are making on our Transformation Programme and the outcomes achieved to date. Work is continuing to transform the capacity of the Department.

Recommendation 9

The DCLG's role as lead Department in several areas of Government policy requires it to set clear strategic goals of its own and to arrange suitable mechanisms to persuade other Departments and non-departmental public bodies across Government of the vision behind those goals and the actions required of them if shared targets are to be reached. Clear arrangements are also required to facilitate the most accurate possible measurement of shared goals, particularly when measurement relies on data collected by other Departments with subtly different policy targets. We would like to see the nature of these agreements and details of the co-operative work undertaken spelled out in future Annual Reports.

13. We agree with the Committee that our relationships with other Government Departments are vital to delivering our vision in places and communities.

14. The Department has been actively involved in the development of the revised performance framework for the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007 that will agree a refreshed and significantly smaller set of 'corporate' PSAs articulating Government's top priority outcomes for the spending review period. The totality of the Government's business will be driven through Departmental Strategic Objectives which will link to and support the new PSA framework, and for each PSA there will be a cross-Government Delivery Agreement setting out the ambition, key performance indicators, strategy for delivery and role of each organisation involved. These Delivery Agreements will be published alongside the CSR settlement.

15. Work to develop these Delivery Agreements is ongoing with Treasury and other Government Departments. We are leading discussions across Government on certain areas – such as housing growth, equalities, community cohesion and subnational economic development and neighbourhood renewal – that should be reflected in the new PSA framework. We are also progressing in formulating our Departmental Strategic Objectives which will form a key part of future Annual Reports.

16. We are also working to share our vision with our partners. As part of our response to our Capability Review, in January 2007 we published a detailed implementation plan for the Local Government White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities* with clear measures across Whitehall to track progress. In January we also published a strategy document setting out the Department's distinctive role in the management of place.

17. The Department has begun a process of drawing up "Partnership Agreements" with Government Departments of key importance to its work. These "Partnership Agreements" will identify shared goals and clarify how these goals will be achieved. We are also continuing to work with other Departments and the Office of National Statistics to improve data collection for measuring performance in meeting shared goals.

STAFFING ISSUES

Recommendation 10

We recognise the efforts made in response to our recommendation that the Department should take further steps to eradicate bullying, harassment or discrimination of staff. We note that senior staff are expected to participate in “dignity and respect” courses and that action is expected to be taken against any who do not. We expect to receive details of feedback from less senior staff on the impact of these programmes through the quarterly staff surveys to be conducted throughout 2007.

18. The Department is committed to creating a positive working environment where everyone must treat their colleagues with dignity and respect. In January 2006, the Permanent Secretary, Peter Housden launched a series of dignity and respect workshops which were mandatory for all team leaders and senior managers. Out of the 704 eligible staff, 610 (87%) have attended the programme since its launch in 2006. The Department takes this issue very seriously and is keeping in regular contact with the training supplier with regard to attendance rates of team leaders and senior managers.

19. Initial feedback indicates that the programmes have increased awareness of what constitutes inappropriate behaviour. Focus groups facilitated by Ipsos MORI will begin shortly to further explore the underlying issues with staff.

20. We have recently made the results of the first quarterly staff survey public.

21. An e-learning package is being developed to complement the workshops and provide additional online support to all staff.

Recommendation 11

We welcome the efforts of senior staff in the Department to make themselves more visible and to open two-way channels of communication with staff, including those beyond the London headquarters. We will watch with interest staff survey results relating to the efforts made towards improved communication and visibility.

22. We have continued to use different methods to communicate with staff and increase the visibility of the senior management team. There is an ongoing series of webchats with Board members on policy and Departmental issues, which enable staff, including those not located in London, to engage directly with the senior management team. We have used a variety of tools to develop two-way communications including Board ‘Question Time’ sessions, briefings where staff used interactive voting technology to answer questions and get instant feedback, seminars, exhibitions, and a weekly intranet poll. We ensure that key external policy announcements are publicised on the Departmental intranet, and that people have a chance to find out more about them, and discuss them with senior staff, at policy seminars.

23. Engagement in interactive events has been good, with a large proportion of staff taking part in seminars and webchats, and voting in online polls. Feedback has shown that staff feel communications within the Department are improving.

24. The Permanent Secretary has taken further steps to increase his visibility. In particular, he has started a structured programme of 21 divisional visits to give him an insight into how the Department works at an operational level and provide staff with the opportunity to talk to him directly about issues affecting their working life. This programme runs to November 2007.

FUTURE POLICY

Recommendation 12

We welcome the Secretary of State's desire to establish the DCLG as a lead Department in governmental climate change policy.

25. Communities and Local Government recognises that it has an important role to play in tackling climate change through helping to reduce the energy and carbon footprint of the built environment. We have been working with industry and environment stakeholders to develop a 'green package' of measures aimed at reducing the energy and carbon footprint of new development in particular. The Department's 2007 Annual Report draws attention to this green package which consists of the publication of the draft Climate Change Planning Policy Statement, the launch of the Code for Sustainable Homes and the consultation on the Department's proposed target that all new homes should be zero-carbon by 2016. Building on the approach of our green package, we are also working with stakeholders to set an ambition for reducing the energy and carbon footprint of new commercial buildings.

Recommendation 13

We note the Secretary of State's argument that home condition reports could not be included as mandatory in Home Information Packs when they are launched in June 2007 because not enough mortgage lenders would have automated valuation systems in place. We note also her view that the packs are ultimately likely to include home condition reports as a result of the changing housebuying market.

26. The Department's 2007 Annual Report provides an update on the Department's work on Home Information Packs. The Committee may also be aware that Baroness Andrews wrote to the Chair of the Merits of Statutory Instruments Committee on the 3rd May in response to the publication of their report on Home Information Packs.

Recommendation 14

We endorse the Secretary of State's view that emergency service co-response schemes can save lives and should be encouraged. We urge the Government to be active in negotiating the creation and continued success of such schemes. We reiterate our earlier recommendation that the Government introduce a national co-response protocol, including guidance on payment for the service.

27. We note the Committee's position and reiterate our commitment to supporting co-responder schemes. In the 2006-08 Fire and Rescue Service National Framework we recommended that Fire and Rescue Services should actively review the opportunities for implementing co-responder schemes in partnership with other agencies. We continue to work closely with the Department of Health to consider what can be done to encourage the Fire and Rescue Service and the Ambulance Service to set up co-responder schemes, including the increased use of defibrillators by fire fighters. However, ultimately, decisions on whether to introduce or maintain co-responding schemes are for each Fire and Rescue Authority to make, subject to local needs and resources.

28. We recognise that co-responder schemes need to be supported by a national protocol that acknowledges the agency with primacy in this area, clearly sets out the role of other agencies and identifies the appropriate cost sharing and saving arrangements. A research project has been commissioned to gather, collate and analyse information and opinion on current co-responding activities, apparatus and practices. This will inform our discussions with the Department of Health and with other stakeholders and, subject to the results of the project, what form national guidance to the Fire and Rescue Service on co-responding schemes should take.

Recommendation 15

The DCLG's new responsibilities for communities, race, faith and equalities pose substantial new challenges to the Department. In particular, the Department needs to establish a leading role across Government on the new gender equality duty. It also needs to establish a clear working relationship with the Commission for Equality and Human Rights. We welcome its appointment of the independent Commission on Integration and Cohesion and look forward to seeing how it responds to that Commission's interim and final reports later this year.

29. The regulations for the gender equality duty came into effect in April 2007. We have been working closely with other Government Departments and the public sector to facilitate the introduction of effective gender equality schemes.

30. We remain on course for the Commission for Equality and Human Rights to be launched in October 2007. A transition team is in place to help establish the governance and operating arrangements.

31. The Commission on Integration and Cohesion's interim report was welcomed by Ruth Kelly on its publication on 21 February 2007. The final report will be published in June 2007 and will outline recommendations to Government on practical ways in which people from different backgrounds can come together under a shared sense of belonging within their local area.



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ISBN 978-0-10-171252-1



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