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Promoting Local Democracy

July 14 2009 – Deepak Rawal

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Why do we need a duty to promote democracy?

- **60%** of people do not believe that they can influence local public services
- **68%** of people know little or nothing about what their council does

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Why do we need a duty to promote democracy? (2)

- In a democracy, people have the right to know how to get involved
- Current lack of basic info
- Benefits to the citizen, community and quality of decision-making when people feel they can have an influence and their voice will be heard and respected…

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Why do we need a duty to promote democracy? (3)
Benefits

Increased participation and invigorated democracy not just good in themselves

Real service benefits of involvement:

- ***reductions in costs***
- ***increased satisfaction***
- ***enhanced service quality***
- ***sense of well-being and happiness***
- ***increased confidence/skills/self-esteem***
- ***citizens becoming more community-orientated***
- ***politicians better at co-operating with citizens***

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Democratic Renewal

"*democratic renewal …is an opportunity for us to look at the way in which communities are actively engaged right across the country*"

John Denham (June 09)

"*citizens have a right to shape their community. They have a right to influence the services they receive*"

John Denham (LGA Conference – July 09)

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Background

- There has long been **concern about the need to engage a wider and more diverse pool of people in civic life**
- Over 2007 the **independent Councillors Commission** considered how best to overcome the barriers to people standing as councillors
- **Strong theme from the evidence was that lack of public awareness was a major barrier** to public participation
- **1st recommendation** was to place a statutory duty on Councils to 'facilitate local democratic engagement'
- Empowerment White Paper ***'Communities in control'*** committed to take this forward as the 'duty to promote democracy'
- Duty to Promote democracy included in the **Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill**

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What the draft legislation says

Statutory duty on local authorities to provide and promote clear and accessible information for citizens:

- What **councils** do, and how people can influence or take part in their decision-making
- What **councillors** do, how to become one and what support you will get
- What **other local public bodies** do, and how people can influence or take part in their decision-making
- What **various civic roles** are, and how people can take them up

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Progress

- Introduced to the House of Lords in December 2008
- Currently in the House of Commons – finished committee on June 18th 2009
- Last stage in House and Royal Assent expected in Autumn
- Aim for duty to commence April 2010
- Currently drafting statutory guidance for consultation after Royal Assent and supporting the local government sector to produce best practice guidance

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Role of local government

- Government is looking to set the framework only
- Building on local government's role as local democratic hub
- local authorities and their communities are best placed to deliver in an imaginative way

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Support available to local government

- **Working with LGiU and Involve** to start process of developing sector led best practice advice and support
- **Stakeholder discussion events** over next few weeks in Kirklees, Staffordshire, Camden, Essex
- Currently **inviting tenders** for next stage of work to produce and promote best practice
- **Resources to be made available to councils** to meet new burden of duty.

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How the duty fits with our other work on engaging communities

Duty to promote democracy important part of the range of actions to encourage greater engagement .

- ***Take Part Pathfinders***
- ***Leadership Centre for Local Government led work on 21st century councillors and be a councillor***
- ***Improving Citizen / Councillor Communications***
- ***BAME Women Councillor Taskforce***
- ***Regional Empowerment Partnerships***
- ***Network of Empowering Authorities***

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Good Practice

- **Tower Hamlets - *Women In Public Life*** programme 246 women contacted the Council about becoming more involved in public life, 25 of them have gone on to take up a range of public positions including non-executive board member for the PCT, number of lay magistrates and school governors and councillors.

- **Leicester - *Make Your Voice Heard*** events with presentations on life as a councillor and sessions on the nomination and election processes. Speed dating between prospective councillors and existing ones. 15 new names on the ballot papers in 2007 - 7 out of 15 were elected.

- **Take Part - Active Learning for Active Citizens** course, showed that 355 participants had become involved in volunteering for the first time, and many had gone on become more involved in public decision making

- ***Be a councillor*** campaign run by **London Councils** had more than 5,000 unique visitors to the Be a Councillor website since its launch in June 2008.