

wecan!

HM Government

Home Office

People and government, working together

LGA Conference Special

Together We Can in Harrogate

Welcome to this special LGA conference edition of We Can! bringing you news of the government's Together We Can action plan which was launched last week.

Together We Can is led by the Home Office's Civil Renewal Unit but it is a truly cross-government action plan in which 12 government departments are collaborating. The 'big idea' is to draw together the policies and initiatives that are enabling more people to have a say in the decisions that affect their local communities and – ultimately – their quality of life.



As the public representatives responsible for the decisions that shape local services, local authorities and their elected members hold the key to success in many of the actions in the Together We Can plan. That is why we are here in Harrogate this week, to talk about Together We Can, hear your stories from around the country, and highlight the contribution already being made to Together We Can by our network of Civic Pioneer local authorities.



The Home Office's Together We Can team will be here throughout the week. We look forward to seeing you at Stand 7, Hall Q in the LGA exhibition and at our fringe event on 7 July.

togetherwecan

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Building new partnerships

by Prime Minister Tony Blair MP



This government has made the reform of public services one of its highest priorities. Our public services are being reformed – but if we are to sustain progress, we must do more to involve citizens in the decisions that affect them.

Where people feel that they are not being listened to, or that their concerns are being overlooked, they can give up even trying to engage with the public bodies responsible. This lack of engagement drives a wedge between us. It erodes the trust and respect between government and people and it hinders public bodies from delivering better services to communities.

The relationship between citizens, communities and public bodies is already being revitalised through real partnership between them. You will be aware of some of the successes in your own areas and, like me, you cannot fail to be impressed by the transformation that can happen when local people's views are taken on board, and when they become part of the solution.

Together We Can is a practical plan, but it is also a philosophy, with an honest message at its heart – government can't solve every problem on its own, and neither can citizens or communities. We need each others' ideas, inspiration, commitment and energy – because together we can find solutions that stick.

Tony Blair



"You can't promote respect without empowerment"

Rt Hon David Miliband MP was the first Government speaker at the Together We Can conference. ODPM's Minister for Communities and Local Government set out the idea of a social contract where respect and empowerment need to go hand in hand if a new relationship between citizens and government is to be established.

"Our society has changed - dramatically - in the last few generations. We no longer live in a country where deference towards authority is automatic, and where respect is based on rank rather than merit.

Few of us would want to turn the clock back. Power has been brought down to size. People think for themselves. It has been a liberation. But the changes have not been without cost. In some ways a void has been left, and even those who merit respect do not always receive it. There is a weakened sense of mutual obligation between individuals and the community, and between the community and government.

And the focus on economic progress has led to stark inequalities. Yes, the country is better off economically than ever before - and still improving. But not everyone is sharing in that advance. The 'economic contract' struck between individuals, business, and government has not been matched by a social contract.

Equal opportunities should be driven by equal respect. So how do we foster respect? Firstly, we need to look at social inclusion. The antisocial behaviour we see today is a legacy of neglect during the 70s and 80s. Yet often it's in the very toughest communities where we find the strongest voluntary organisations. We need to use that spirit of community to turn things around.

Secondly, we should expect responsibility in return. The silent majority of people, including the majority of young people, share a set of ideals about society. Ten times more young people are active volunteers than repeat offenders. We need to harness those ideals and values.

Thirdly, public services must adapt to the idea of a new social contract. It is hard to promote respect without empowerment.



We see examples all around the country where positive things are happening. Where a derelict pub has been transformed into workspaces and a community café, and where young people on an estate have been made junior wardens - becoming part of the solution instead of the problem. If you feel you own something you are more likely to protect it. Civic pride is the oxygen of a successful society.

The challenge we face is to strengthen communities in an age of individualism. In an interdependent world, we need each other more, not less."

“Get together and you can achieve anything”



Following an inspiring short film about the work of Pembroke Street residents in Plymouth, who have taken responsibility for, and transformed their neighbourhood, DEFRA Minister Elliot Morley MP and Rosie Winterton MP, Department of Health, joined David Miliband MP and answered questions from the floor.

A number of exciting, and even challenging subjects were raised. Ministers and audience members worked together to propose solutions, with David Miliband asking one delegate to email him personally on one particular issue so that he could take it forward.

We've summarised a few of the questions and subsequent responses to give you a flavour of the panel discussion. There was a general acknowledgement by the Ministers that many of the questions raised important and difficult issues and we need to work together to tackle these.

Environment and mental health

Topic: Has Government really made the connection – and how can local people prioritise their needs?

Poor housing and a poor environment are inextricably linked to poor health. Mental health in particular can be heavily influenced by where people are living, as well as by other factors such as security, housing, job opportunities and education. Some parts of the community can be particularly affected by these and other specific factors - mothers of black children, for instance, face an additional range of problems associated with the relatively high incidence of exclusion.

Panel response: Health funding is now being shifted so that 80% of budgets are controlled at a local level - allowing local people, through patients' forums, to influence how funds are spent, and to help shape the healthcare needs of local communities. The challenge now is to take that agenda forward, with resources dedicated to providing training to enable individuals from all parts of the community to play a greater role in the decision-influencing process.

Tenant Management Organisations

Topic: Have they got a future? The issue of the role of TMOs was keenly discussed, with delegates feeling that they were being frozen out in favour of the newer Arms Length Management Organisations. These are being given preference, especially with regards to stock transfers.

Panel response: David Miliband emphasised that the need for TMOs had not diminished, and that they still have a vital role to play in enabling people to shape their local housing needs.

National targets - local needs

Topic: How can they be reconciled? Why, asked one delegate, does the Government insist on setting national targets when this fails to recognise very different local situations? In particular, this approach can skew spending priorities, when local people know best what is needed. Another delegate in the field of health asked if we could return to per capita spending and GP commissioning, giving real decision-making to local people.

Panel response: Different areas, agreed Rosie Winterton, have different health needs. The Government's position is that it sets a framework of national targets; one benefit recognised by the public is that this allows people to judge whether or not they are getting as good a service as other parts of the country.

It's then up to local communities to look at their priorities and decide how to best deliver those services and at what pace. Part of Together We Can's remit will be to encourage people to come forward and tell Government what those priorities are.

Volunteers

Topic: Why are volunteers so unappreciated and undervalued? Some delegates expressed concern that funding was inconsistent, and had to be constantly fought for, and that their work made them feel exhausted, uncared for and unappreciated. Larger organisations in particular seemed more able to gain funding than smaller ones.

Panel response: Rosie Winterton responded that, certainly in the health sector, every attempt to celebrate people's efforts was being made, and that the sector relies heavily upon volunteers. But funding was always going to be an issue: with only so much money "in the pot", every organisation would have to make its case.



Local Authorities

Topic: How much power do local authorities really want to concede? Some organisations feel they are working hard to change their communities despite their local authorities, rather than with them.

Panel response: In David Miliband's words, "Councils don't always know best. But it's easy to knock local government. Central government also has to bear its share of the blame for not letting people in".

Joined up action

Topic: As one delegate from Clapham, London, pointed out, it's hard to know which part of the system to approach when you want to get funding for improvements. How can we achieve more joined up action?

Panel response: The answer has to be better integration between different bodies and different departments. The concept of Local Authority Grants is designed to help this process.

Racial inequality and discrimination

Topic: How much recognition is there in Together We Can about racial inequality and discrimination?

Panel response: Measures to combat racial inequalities are now integrated into every aspect of the Government's policies - not bolted on, but being built into the way policies are designed and implemented.

We're all in this together

by Hazel Blears MP, Minister of State for the Home Office

The approach of 'Together We Can' is simple. Give people a real chance to tackle their problems, and they will find solutions. This is based on what actually works. Examples from a wide range of government activities have been building up. You will find many of these in the 'Together We Can' brochure.

We see more and more evidence that the involvement of local people in the decisions that affect them leads to better results. The involvement of communities across health, housing, education, leisure and transport has made a real difference.

Across different government departments, and in local government, we have all been learning and developing strategies to apply the lessons of successful community engagement more widely. The time has come to draw together our policies on different fronts and integrate them in a single action plan, so that we can maximise their impact.

Together We Can marks the beginning of a new relationship between citizens and public institutions. It signals a commitment from across Government to build the capacity of communities to

influence public policies and services, and to develop more opportunities for that capacity to be exercised.

The action plan sets out eight strands of activity arranged under four themes: Citizens and Democracy, Regeneration and Cohesion, Safety and Justice, and Health and Sustainability. The plan brings together an important range of initiatives to empower the public to shape policies which affect them.

People should know that local agencies and government are open to them – listening to them – and that they can effect change.

Central and local government relationships with local people are the key to success and we will learn from the experience of all local authorities who are championing this approach.

But the plan is not the sum of our ambition. We want to ensure that the approach of Together We Can is fully embedded in the governance of our society. Every new generation should have its say, and neighbourhoods should be able to go to other local areas and say 'we faced these problems – this is how we resolved them' and learn from each other.

There is a lot right about our society, but there is a lot more we can do to make a difference – a genuine two-way process is starting to happen up and down the country. To renew our democracy and build mutual respect between people and government, we should aim for nothing less.



Workshops in action

Eight different workshops were held at the conference: a chance for representatives from a diverse range of organisations and standpoints to pool their knowledge and ideas on each of the eight strands of the Together We Can action plan. Here, in brief, are the principal outcomes from each workshop as presented to all delegates, including Hazel Blears MP and David Blunkett MP, by the workshop "Champions".



Citizens and Democracy

Together we can ensure children and young people have their say

Champion: **Carrie Supple**
Project Manager of Youth Act, Citizenship Foundation

- We need commitment from the top; serious time given and serious money, if systems are to be put in place which are sustainable and enable people to be heard.
- Policies and projects have to be "made to fit" - speaking to young people in their language and not simply bolting youth policies onto adult ones.
- Equal opportunities must be in place to ensure that young people directly represent the community they come from.
- The whole experience needs to be fun as well as practical in order to engage young people, and expectations have to be managed - some projects will take longer than others.

Together we can strengthen our democracy

Champion: **Adam Lent**
Clerk to the Power Enquiry

- Feedback is essential. Citizens who do get involved in decision making processes want to know what has happened to their input; has it been taken on board, and what impact has their contribution made - even if it has not led to anything directly.
- Decision makers need to be truly involved - to be seen engaging and listening and prepared to attend the "tough meetings".
- Information and processes should be accessible to ordinary people and not wrapped in jargon. Guides and documents should clearly explain how people can play their part in decision making.
- To achieve the goal of democratic engagement you must unlock the creativity of communities allowing them to solve their own problems in partnership.



“Are we missing a trick? Can we make more impact out of the money we are already spending by pooling resources between departments? We also need to build up and down - as well as side to side, connecting local with national government spending.”

Hazel Blears MP



“Racial equality is not on the back burner, but it tends to be seen as embedded in everything we do - not simply added on to policies.”

Hazel Blears MP

Regeneration and Cohesion

Together we can revitalise neighbourhoods

Champion: **Ed Cox**
Community Pride Initiative Manchester

- Agencies must work together at a grassroots level if they are to have an impact, and link neighbourhoods to city and district wide strategies.
- We need to recognise that some local authority councillors may feel threatened by the new community leaders.
- It is important to give the necessary time for messages to get through and for programmes to become embedded.
- Reasonable resources must be put behind key government programmes of community empowerment.

Safety and Justice

Together we can build safer communities

Champion: **Denise Hartley**
Chair of INTAG (Ingol and Tanterton Action Group)

- Shared accountability, shared ownership and shared responsibility are essential. There is nothing more disempowering for a person than not knowing who to turn to over a problem.
- Resourcing must be at a local level if it is to meet local needs.
- Regular dialogue from the very beginning is part of the solution, and that means from the top as well as at a grassroots level. People do need to know what is going on.
- The right resources need to be put in place to engage the hard to reach. This can mean assisting people to give them the skills they need to run meetings and speak publicly. Lessons should be learned from other groups. There need to be bottom up/top down targets, and enthusiastic champions can make or break a scheme's success.

Together we can increase community cohesion and race equality

Champion: **Vaughan Jones**
Director, Praxis

- There is a concern that the media has a huge responsibility for the current negative environment, particularly surrounding asylum and refugee issues.
- Racial equality is slipping onto the “back burner” and the history of black and ethnic minorities needs to be remembered so that racial equality is properly understood.
- It is necessary to understand the distinctiveness and the commonality of community experiences... and that excluded parts of the white community also have to be part of the tapestry.
- Capacity building - empowering groups to move beyond small scale delivery and scale up their achievements by providing more funding.

Together we can reduce re-offending and raise confidence in the Criminal Justice System

Champion: **Sue Raikes**
Chief Executive, Thames Valley Partnership

- The Reading Restorative Parks project is an example of how offenders can provide reparations - and give something back to the community they have damaged. To persuade a sceptical public that this is a worthwhile exercise, the local community had to be engaged and their trust won. By making community service real and relevant, this can be achieved.
- Barriers of ignorance and fear must be overcome. This can be achieved over time by engaging the community in the process, and allowing them to make suggestions.
- Community engagement doesn't happen in a vacuum. It requires a big commitment.
- There needs to be a measure of flexibility as well as fewer targets - especially as these can vary locally and nationally. And the government should stop pandering to the Daily Mail!



Health and Sustainability

Together we can improve our health and well-being

Champion: **Linda Henry**
Healthy Communities Collaborative

- Education needs to start earlier. Over the last two decades the connection between eating and health had been unpicked in schools.
- The professionals should let go, learn to value their volunteers and trust them to deliver a government agenda.
- We all need to share what works, and Together We Can is a fantastic opportunity. There are phenomenal examples of good practice out there - they just need to be brought together and shared. And while a website is an excellent resource, lessons are best learned by seeing them in action - there aren't the resources in place for that to happen.
- There needs to be flexible operation in processes.

Together we can secure our future

Champion: **Oz Osborne**
Westden Rural Links Cornwall

- The Government must provide more consistent support for voluntary and community organisations if they are to be sustainable.
- Awareness still needs to be raised amongst the public on what sustainability really means - there is still a huge amount of ignorance.
- There is a strong argument that by "branding" sustainability, perceptions will change.
- We need to respect individuals' experience and knowledge - and not assume that experts know everything. The real experts on housing, regeneration and other areas are often already in the community.

"I make an effort to talk in a clear and simple way: it's much easier to understand what someone is talking about if they relate it to real life; using jargon isn't necessary and most of the time just confuses people."

Hazel Blears MP

Civic Pioneers: actively making a difference

Pivotal to the success of Together We Can will be the way local authorities embrace the concept of empowering local people. During the past year the Home Office has recruited 21 local authorities to its Civic Pioneers network – local authorities committed to developing community engagement and learning from each other. We talk to two attending the London conference.

Maria Price
Team Leader,
Area Co-ordination Team,
Manchester City Council

We joined the Civic Pioneers network in February. The Home Office made a presentation of the objectives - initially to the officers. We spoke to other pioneers to see how it was working for them - and what they were getting out of it. We talked not only to other metropolitan authorities but to smaller, rural ones too.

Once we were persuaded, it was time to sound out the Leader of the Council and then the members.

For us it was a natural step. Manchester has always been at the forefront of engaging with the community. We've had a community strategy in place for three years and this has allowed us to focus on priorities. We've lifted our sights and looked to engage other partners - including the voluntary sector.

In terms of outcomes it's too soon to tell; but we have commitment throughout the organisation: each department has a Champion and everyone is buying in to the concept. This is our opportunity to really engage with our residents.

Kamal Lallian
Policy Officer
Slough Borough Council

We joined earlier this year. We're already heavily involved in community consultation and engagement and we're using this to develop our local strategic partnership. Our partners include the police, health authority, job centres, businesses, voluntary sector and

the local faith partnership. We have just produced our first directory listing all the events, forums and opportunities for people to shape policies. This will include a Community Involvement Week.

Slough's Faith Partnership is particularly important: 36% of our community are from black and ethnic minority groups. The proximity of Heathrow means we also have a high percentage of asylum seekers. Another local key issue is employment. Yes we have a buoyant economy but not enough local people are working here because of a skills gap - we're looking to address that. We're keen to show the outcomes of engaging - and one of the 12 targets in our Local Public Service Agreement is improving the perception of local people in how much they can shape our policies - and central to that will be letting them know regularly exactly how they have contributed: that they have not just been listened to, but heard.



Advancing the vision

Wrapping up proceedings for the day was Rt Hon David Blunkett MP, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions - the man who first set out his vision of civil renewal during his time as Home Secretary.

The fact that so many departments have now signed up to Together We Can was, he said, a sign that the vision was being adopted across

government. Even his new colleagues in the Department of Work and Pensions were coming to realise that civil renewal is at the heart of their work as well.

He highlighted the role that older people can play within society and in pushing forward the agenda of Together We Can, but also said that one generation in particular must be taken into account. "At any one

time, around 150,000 16 and 17 year olds are not in education, training or a job. They are becoming the forgotten generation."

His ambition is to have a country in which future generations can flourish. Together We Can will help us reach that goal.

What next?

Together We Can has progressed much further than finding inspiring examples of what can be done through empowering local communities to work together with public bodies to tackle problems.

At the Conference, the Together We Can action plan was published. It sets out positive actions which will ensure that ideas turn into reality.

The action plan describes the ways in which 12 different government departments intend to work more closely with communities to enable more people to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.

It is the start of a movement right across government towards working in this way.

Copies of the action plan are available at the LGA Conference and Exhibition. Please visit us at **Stand 7, Hall Q**. They can also be downloaded at www.homeoffice.gov.uk and at www.active-citizen.org.uk. Further printed copies are available from:

Collette Ogilvie, Civil Renewal Unit, Communities Group, Home Office, 1st Floor Peel Building D, 2 Marsham Street London SW1P 4DF

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Want to get involved?

If you, or your community or organisation, would like to know more about how to be part of the "Together We Can" initiative - in any capacity - you can find out more from the websites below, or get in contact with Henry Tam at:

Dr. Henry Tam
Head of Civil Renewal Unit
Communities Group
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

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Useful information

Other useful sources of information can be found on the following web sites:

Active Citizenship Centre – www.active-citizen.org.uk

Civil Renewal pages on the Home Office website – <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/comrace/civil/index.html>

See you there!

The Together We Can team is at Stand 7, Hall Q in the LGA Exhibition.

The next Together We Can event will take place on 18 October 2005 in Birmingham; we'll be announcing the venue soon.

We'll be looking at what we have achieved since the launch and what further actions we can take to make more progress.

The third Together We Can conference will be held in February 2006.

We'll be reviewing the action plan and celebrating the achievements of individuals and groups.

For information on forthcoming events please visit <http://togetherwecan.homeoffice.gov.uk/> and remember to save the dates!

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