

RCN Policy Unit

Policy Briefing 05/2008

NHS Constitution Debate:

White Paper on Empowerment - Department for Communities and Local Government

April 2008

RCN briefing and call for response

The Department for Communities and Local Government is holding a debate in advance of the publication of an Empowerment White Paper to be published in summer 2008¹.

The RCN is particularly interested in the questions that relate to active citizenship and the revival of civic society and local democracy. There is a link across to current RCN activity on the content of an NHS Constitution for England.

We have seen in England a watering down of the powers that have been given to the formal structures for public and patient involvement in health. The current legislation which has created LINKs – local involvement networks that have funding and support from local government has limited resources to carry out its range of functions on a local level and no national body to oversee and support its activity. A growing number of RCN members is the relevance of Overview and Scrutiny Committees in each local authority to assess issues of health service provision. OSC are part of the local government structure and many RCN activists are now attending meetings of OSC to raise issues about health in a professional environment of scrutiny.

While the structures may be in place, there is concern that active citizenship is on the decline. The current statistics show that the average local councillor is likely to be male, white and aged 58 years. Encouraging news is that the proportion of BME and women councillors is growing, but this is extremely slowly. The nature of who is an active citizen taking an active role in local public matters is a matter of concern for Government.

Against this background, the RCN is seeking views from members in advance of the publication of the Empowerment White Paper. The prompt questions are:

1. How can government at all levels work together to tackle worklessness and promote enterprise in the most deprived areas?

¹ *Unlocking the Talent of Our Communities* 5 March 2008 Department for Communities and Local Government (<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/unlockingtalent>)

2. What are the best means of coordinating social, economic and physical regeneration?
3. What is the role of government in encouraging and supporting citizens to be active?
4. What steps need to be taken to revive involvement in local civic and democratic roles?
5. How can the power of consumers be better used to improve local services?
6. How can social housing tenants be given more choice and voice?
7. What more is needed to encourage consistently strong local leadership?
8. How best can we increase opportunities for communities to hold local public officials and representatives to account?

Can you send your views to Helen Caulfield at Helen.caulfield@rcn.org.uk or write to the Policy Unit RCN 20 Cavendish Square London W1G 0RN.