



**The Rt Hon Hazel Blears MP**

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Dear Darra,

Thank you for coming in this week to discuss "Our Shared Future", the final report of your Commission on Integration and Cohesion. I am grateful to you and all those who worked with you to produce such a thoughtful and ambitious report.

Since publication I have been giving serious consideration to how Government can best respond. As a first step, I wanted to set out in this letter what I see as the priority actions going forward. I will then be responding more formally to the entire range of your recommendations in January 2008.

From the outset, you make clear that Britain has a history of integration and cohesion of which we can be proud. Increased diversity has brought with it significant benefits. For centuries, people from all over the world have made Britain their home, enriching our culture, our economy, and our civic life.

New data published this week from our Citizenship Survey confirmed that just over 80% of people think that people of different backgrounds get on well in their local area. 85% felt they belonged strongly to Britain. An encouraging 77% felt they strongly belonged to their neighbourhood. So I agree with your assessment that Britain is a place where the vast majority of people feel they belong, and are comfortable and confident about diversity.

But we cannot rest on our laurels. As a country, we are experiencing enormous change. Britain grows more diverse and new patterns of mobility across the world continue to make a difference to everyday life in our local communities. There are new challenges, affecting parts of the country which may not have experienced them before.

So as a Government and a country, we must be honest about the fact that there are issues we need to address. And we must ensure that we have the ideas and policies to tackle them over the next 10 years.

To succeed, Britain needs to be able to take advantage of the opportunities of globalisation. But for some people, living in local areas experiencing change can mean fewer shared experiences, a sense that others are getting preferential treatment, a sense that they can no longer influence decisions. The benefits of globalisation are not always distributed equally among different communities and neighbourhoods. At worst, this is being used by extremists seeking to drive a wedge between different groups.

That is why I have made clear that work to build cohesion – to tackle prejudice and tensions, increase perceptions of fairness, build strong bridges between different groups and develop a sense of belonging – is a top priority for my Department.

I want us all to live in a Britain of strong, confident communities, where people of all different backgrounds get on together. I want us to live in a country where violent extremism of any kind, whatever its roots and motivations, is utterly rejected. And I want us to live in a country where everybody who plays by the rules has the opportunity to get on in life.

I share your vision of a society of equal opportunities, local communities where citizens are actively engaged, and a Britain where neighbours have respect and concern for each other's welfare.

To get there, I think there are five priority actions that my Department can take forward, working closely with local authorities and their partners.

The first is to respond to your challenge that building integrated and cohesive communities takes "time and constant attention". In response, I have secured a **significant increase in support for local authorities** for cohesion from £2m in 2007/08 to £50m over the next three years.

I know that some local authorities are already doing great work in bringing communities together. Making sure they have the premises in which people can meet each other, share food and compare their shared experiences. Putting in place school linking schemes, and inviting young people to directly contribute to their communities as neighbourhood wardens. Celebrating local identity and pride through campaigns like "Celebrating Coventry", or the "225,000 people, 1 community" banners throughout Waltham Forest.

Some areas are already implementing your report. I know you have reviewed your own cohesion strategy in Ealing. Other authorities are now prioritising their work so that they focus on where they can make the most difference. I want this additional money to enable them to go further still, and for others to follow in their footsteps.

The success of this additional investment will be measured against a **new and extended emphasis on cohesion** in our Public Service Agreement. We will continue to measure the current indicator – focused on perceptions of how people of different backgrounds get on in local areas. But in response to your report and to our wider consultation, we will also add two new indicators focused on meaningful interaction, and on developing a sense of belonging.

My second priority is more focused support from the centre for local areas now charged with building cohesion as part of their core business. With the new Local Area Agreements, local authorities will be properly empowered to set their own agendas on cohesion, and to decide where their own priorities lie. But Central Government needs to continue to provide targeted support.

Your report explained how different areas experience different types of challenge and that what works best in a rural area with significant migration for the first time will be very different from what is most effective in an urban area with settled communities, for example. I agree that this means national policy should no longer be applied on a "one size fits all" basis. So in January we will publish **best practice for different types of areas** that turns the "family groups" you have identified into a set of clear

practical actions. And we will use those family groups to reposition our engagement with local authorities – funding them through Local Area Agreements, but using the typology to assess the complex ward-level pictures they need to respond to.

We will also provide additional support to the group of areas you identify as experiencing particular challenges from new migration. Together with the Improvement and Development Agency we plan to produce a **consistent template for a local area information pack** – outlining to new arrivals their rights, their responsibilities and the local customs – no later than January 2008. This will build on work already done in Cornwall, and in East Lancashire, where local packs ensure that migrant workers know their rights but also give them practical advice about laws and local customs. We will also be offering **new teams to support local areas experiencing particularly rapid change**.

As we look ahead, I want to see better progress in engaging employers in this support – learning from the experiences of Tower Hamlets, where city firms mentor young people, or bus companies like Firstbus in Manchester, who offer ESOL classes to their workers at times that suit them. I also agree with your assessment that we will also need better engagement with settled communities. All of our work, whatever the type of local area, needs to be based on a “whole community” approach. You identify community development techniques as one answer to this, and I would certainly expect to see a greater emphasis on these as local authorities begin to implement your report.

The third priority is to set a **greater emphasis on “bridging” activities that bring people from different backgrounds together**. Your report said that the sorts of activities that bring people together and create strong and open communities were fundamental to cohesion and I agree.

In January I hope to publish more research that backs up the importance of this kind of activity, and makes the case for more bridging activities where people live, work and study. In partnership with the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) we have already published guidance for schools on how they can bring to life the new duty to promote community cohesion, and DCSF launched a significant new programme of school linking this week. We can go further by twinning places of worship, supporting interfaith projects like those in Blackburn that encourage young women to “meet their neighbours”, and looking at creative uses of art to bring people together to develop that strong sense of civic pride, like the work in Walker, Newcastle.

In addition, in December, we will open consultation on our new **interfaith strategy** – making clear what we expect from funding interfaith work, and outlining how we will meet the Prime Minister’s ambition for interfaith provision in every local community.

Clearly, the ability to speak English is absolutely critical to this interaction across groups. We will respond to your findings by publishing **guidance on translation**, aimed at local authorities, Government Departments and their agencies. The practical measures you have outlined will go a long way to helping local authorities make the right decision when it comes to translating.

But reducing translation will not work unless we are confident that ESOL provision is being delivered in the right way to build cohesion. Spending on ESOL has nearly trebled in the last 4 years and will continue to expand. And the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills has recently implemented new arrangements which are intended to bring a better focus to ESOL. These new arrangements will be kept

under review. Before Christmas, I will also hold a **Citizens Jury** to discuss these and other links. I will ask people directly how they think we can incentivise people to learn English, and how we can get a stronger sense of how speaking English is so fundamental to getting on in life.

My fourth priority is to develop a better understanding of our goals on cohesion across other policy areas. In the longer term, making cohesion a part of everything Government does, rather than a priority in isolation, is how we can make an enduring difference.

As a first step therefore, we will set up in the early new year a new web-based **One Stop Shop on Cohesion**, developed in partnership with the Institute of Community Cohesion. This will bring together in one place all the information needed by cohesion practitioners, policy-makers and other organisations from a whole range of sectors.

In addition, in January we will also publish a **mainstreaming toolkit**, aimed at setting out just how organisations from Arts Council England to the Academy for Sustainable Communities can contribute to our shared agenda. And this will also include **new cohesion impact assessments** – voluntary rather than statutory, but aimed at illustrating how local decisions on regeneration and wider investments need to be taken in the context of shifting demographic patterns, and the Commission’s key principle of “visible social justice”.

Related to this we will also publish new **Cohesion Guidance for Funders**, focused on how existing funding streams – for example, support given to the Third Sector – can be used to prioritise cohesion. I absolutely agree with the Commission’s suggestion that local councils and their partners should stop and think twice about whether service provision for one particular community is automatically the right way forward, or whether it might be used to provide an opportunity for building bridges.

You referred to this issue in your report as “single group funding”, although I worry that the terminology as outlined might be misleading. We want to get across firstly that these new funding criteria will be something for all organisations to consider. Promoting integration and cohesion should apply to all organisations not just the BME voluntary sector. And secondly that we are primarily interested in the activities being funded rather than the groups delivering them.

Clearly there is a balance to be struck, and local authorities will know best how to judge when particular groups in their area need to draw strength from resources within their own community (“bonding”), and when they should be supported to learn from and interact with other groups (“bridging”). New migrant groups, for example, may find the support of other new migrants essential to acclimatising to their life in the UK. Women within particular communities may need safe spaces to provide support for issues such as domestic violence and healthcare. And organisations organised around one particular identity may still provide activities for many communities and groups.

These organisations have often been at the heart of social change and, where the need remains, we would want to see conditions that enable them to continue to support excluded and marginalised communities to succeed. Our Cohesion Guidance for Funders will therefore clarify how organisations working at local level can best provide the bridging activities we want to prioritise, and the criteria that funders need to consider if we are to make progress in bringing people together for shared activities rather than continuing to focus on their differences. There is much good practice to

draw on, with local authorities such as Barking & Dagenham already making clear that funding will only be awarded if it fits with their community cohesion strategy.

Finally, and drawing together much of this work, my fifth priority at this stage is a renewed commitment to Citizenship and civic pride. My Department is working closely with Lord Goldsmith on his Citizenship review, which will take some of the ideas in your report around Citizenship Ceremonies and consider them in the wider context. Looking ahead, I also expect the Youth Citizenship Commission identified in the recent Governance of Britain paper to consider the idea of citizenship ceremonies for young people.

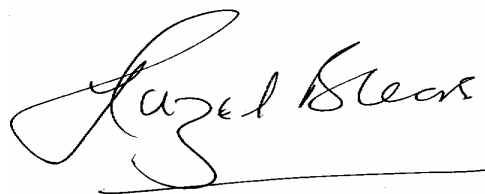
But I am also keen to see local responses to promoting citizenship, and am interested in particular in the results of the four pilot Citizens Days in 2005. "Open House" days at local institutions such as the town hall and courts, street festivals where people come together to share food, music, art and drama, free guided walks to explore local history – these and other pilot events helped draw people into their communities, and encouraged them to volunteer in the organisations helping make them stronger. We will therefore publish in the coming months **guidance on how to run successful local citizenship activities**, developed with the Citizenship Foundation and aimed at the promotion of a common sense of belonging that combines local traditions with a strong sense of Britishness.

I am confident that taken together, these five priority actions will accelerate our work on cohesion and maintain the momentum that your report has created.

And in terms of what you can expect from that response, I hope this letter makes clear that our formal response to your Commission in January will include targeted and practical action rather than simply reiterating our shared messages.

This letter includes a comprehensive set of measures to tackle the new issues we face. It will promote integration and develop strong, resilient communities. And it will help underline once more our shared British values – from respect for the rule of law, to tolerance and fairness. New investment will help spread a stronger sense of civic pride and shared heritage. And better targeted support will raise to a new level our work with local authorities and communities, ensuring they have greater support at a local level in building united communities.

In closing, may I thank you again for all of your hard work, and for the energy and commitment shown by you and your Commissioners. Your report provides evidence and research that will put us on a sound footing as we take its practical recommendations forward. And it has succeeded in identifying the practical and achievable ways in which local authorities and their partners can help build a more cohesive Britain.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Hazel Blears". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line underneath.

**HAZEL BLEARS**