



**Lewes District Council**

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Response by email to: [settlement.consult@communities.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:settlement.consult@communities.gsi.gov.uk)

Dear Sir,

**Consultation Response: Provisional 2015-16 Local Government Finance Settlement.**

Please accept this consultation response on behalf of Lewes District Council.

In his statement to the Provisional Finance Settlement, The Minister referred to the fact that Parishes are an important part of local government, delivering valuable and valued local services.

The Minister also highlighted the importance of Devolution and mentioned why the Government has devoted much effort to empower our great cities and communities to drive local growth through a redistribution of power, away from Westminster and Whitehall, to councils, communities, and individuals across the nation.

Against this particular background I would ask the Minister to accept this submission as a response to his request for views on whether the highest spending parishes should be subject to the same referendum principle as the rest of local government.

Lewes District Council has embraced the Government Localism agenda and has embarked upon a journey to devolve its open spaces and recreation areas to the Town and Parish Councils in the district.

The first step of the journey was actioned during the current year 2014/2015 using the council tax setting process and relevant legislation to charge the taxpayers in each Town and Parish area the cost of their local open space areas. The legislative mechanism is called "Special Expenses".

This move has already raised greater service cost awareness and through retendering for a grounds maintenance contract a lower service cost has been established for the benefit of local taxpayers.

We have met with Town and Parish Councils where Special Expenses apply and they are keen to take on ownership and responsibility for these open spaces. We aim to devolve three sites during 2015/2016 which will impact on local 2015/2016 taxes. The rest of the sites (which are the majority) we aim to devolve by autumn 2015, ready for the 2016/2017 local tax calculations.

The greatest impediment to our implementation of this localism agenda and the greatest concern of Town and Parish Councils is the uncertainty that surrounds the referenda criteria and when it might and might not apply.

I would therefore like to submit for your consideration that Town and Parish Councils be excluded from any referenda requirement where:

- Towns and Parishes take on ownership of assets and services from a principal authority in the spirit of the Localism Act 2011, and
- It can be demonstrated that the aggregate band D taxation level of the combined Principal Authority and Town/Parish which has devolved/received the assets and services, remains the same.

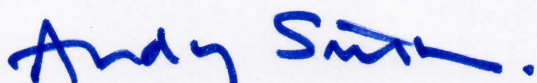
I have carefully worded this suggestion so that Towns and Parishes would be included within any criteria you choose to set if the principal council failed to address its own level of taxation to reflect what should be a transfer from its precept to that of the local Town or Parish Council. As part of the devolution agreement we would seek to give a commitment that the District Council will not subsume the transferred budget into its own Council Tax requirement.

If the Minister is minded to introduce referenda criteria for some, or all Town and Parish Councils could he please consider indicating those circumstances where he would be minded to favourably consider representations on a case by case basis, such as the instance I have referred to above and also to indicate that these circumstances would transcend financial years, or at least the next two financial years. This would provide a reasonable degree of certainty enabling our devolution programme to be delivered.

I understand that the local referenda procedure would be a vehicle for a Town or Parish Council to seek a mandate for this devolution policy but the counter argument is that the end result of our policy is no change at individual taxpayer level and therefore it would be an unnecessary and costly exercise to conduct a referenda in this case, particularly as one of our key priorities is to save money and put it back into the pockets of our residents and businesses, where we can.

Finally, I would also like to request that the referenda announcements for Towns and Parishes (if The Minister introduces criteria) are made at the same time as the Provisional Finance Settlement. I would like to thank the Minister in advance for taking the time to consider this submission.

Yours sincerely



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Deputy Leader and Lead Cabinet Councillor for Corporate Resources

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