

Mr Eric Pickles M.P.
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

BAA
SofS
Transparency
LG

Councillor Robert Knowles
Leader of the Council

When calling please ask for: Cllr. Robert Knowles

Direct line: 01483 523208

Calls may be recorded for training or monitoring

E-mail: Robert.knowles@waverley.gov.uk

Date: 09 June 2010

Dear Secretary of State

LOCAL TRANSPARENCY

I read your letter of 4 June to Council leaders with great interest.

Many Councils – not just Windsor & Maidenhead – are already making significant moves to ensure that interesting and useful information is available to local residents on our Council websites. For example, my own authority has published details of all our spending over £500 since the start of this year, and we have also had details of our Chief Executive's salary information freely available on-line for well over a year now.

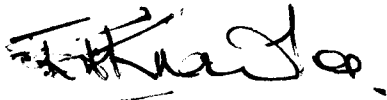
I am concerned, however, that the new spirit of localism, freedom and trust in local government that David Cameron has heralded must be maintained as we go forward to implement the new government's priorities. It would be a very backward step if central government started legislating the form and content of local authority websites, rather than allowing us to exercise our own discretion over such matters.

Moreover, there are some quite significant data protection and cost implications involved in some of the measures your letter envisages. Licensing is a particularly good example. My authority is not unique in receiving several hundreds of licensing applications of various types each year. I am concerned that, should we be compelled to publish all of these on-line, the staffing costs involved in running our website could escalate out of all proportion, due to the vast amount of redacting and editing that would be required. The risk that sensitive and confidential information about applications could accidentally get into the public domain is also one that worries me. You will be aware of a prosecution of a local authority in the south of England for failing to comply with Data Protection recently, for publishing full planning applications on their website, including personal details.

My Council is in favour of access to information by local people. We are, however, also very cost-conscious, and we have spent considerable time and effort in streamlining our processes and staffing costs, in order to reduce pressure on Council Tax payers. My worry is that the current drive towards transparency, while a sound political principle, must not be taken to an extreme, in which Councils are spending large sums on processing and publishing information for which there is no local demand and no local interest resulting in cut backs in front line services.

I hope to be reassured that you do not have in mind the imposition of a 'one-size-fits-all' instruction, but that you will allow democratically elected Council leaders to exercise their own discretion in this matter and more importantly you will take full care not to encourage Councils to step outside of the law.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R Knowles', with a horizontal line underneath.

Cllr Robert Knowles
Leader of the Council



Councillor Robert Knowles
Leader
Waverley Borough Council
Council Offices
The Burys
Godalming
Surrey
GU7 1HR

The Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP
*Secretary of State for Communities and Local
Government*

**Department for Communities and Local
Government**
Eland House
Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5DU

Tel: 0303 444 3450
Fax: 0303 444 3289
E-Mail: eric.pickles@communities.gsi.gov.uk

www.communities.gov.uk

Our Ref: ER/ER/013620/10

Dear Robert

01 JUL 2010

LOCAL TRANSPARENCY

Thank you for your letter of 9 June on taking forward the Governments transparency agenda.

Like Waverley, a number of public sector organisations, have already wholeheartedly embraced the transparency agenda. We have received support from local councils on their commitment to publishing data and a number of councils have been in touch to let us know that they are on target to publish spend of £500 and above by January 2011. Windsor and Maidenhead is just another example of good practice.

The drive to publish data should be the benefit this has to citizens. We want a society where active and engaged citizens can easily see what decisions have been made and where their money has been spent locally.

There will, of course, need to be limited exceptions surrounding personal information that falls under the Data Protection Act, and it is particularly important to protect children, and other vulnerable people.

Government is looking at a number of legislative options, to take this policy forward, and I can assure you it is not the Governments intention to make the requirement to publish data too prescriptive or to encourage any breaches of the law.

The aim is to move councils to a position of proactively publishing data unless there is a reason not to, rather than vice versa.

Your ever
Sincere

THE RT HON ERIC PICKLES MP