

Response to Cabinet public engagement event

Durham 2010

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INTRODUCTION

On 18 February the Cabinet met in Durham, its first meeting in the North East region of the UK. The Cabinet was pleased to meet all those who participated and to discuss the issues that were most important to them.

This process provides the Cabinet with a fantastic opportunity to hear what matters to people across the whole of the NE region, as well as the chance to see many of the region's success stories in schools, business and healthcare.

I said I would ensure that everyone who raised questions received a response. I also believe that the information should be made available to the wider public, allowing them to understand how the Government is addressing topics of interest to the region. Therefore this document summarises the points made by participants and gives the Government's response.



Gordon Brown
Prime Minister

YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION

What the public said:

What is Government doing to ensure poor-performing schools reach the required standards? Should these schools be allowed more time to reach their targets?

The Government response:

Through National Challenge and the World Class Primary programme, struggling schools are receiving more help than ever before to raise standards. Because of this extra support and funding, the number of secondary schools which didn't meet the Government's benchmark of 30% of pupils achieving 5 good GCSEs (including English and maths) fell to just 247 schools this year compared to 1600 schools in 1997. Now 70% of pupils get five good GCSEs compared to just 46% in 1997 with over 600,000 more pupils leaving state schools with five GCSEs including English and maths. The Gaining Ground initiative provides resources to schools to build on success, forming partnerships with stronger schools helping them to achieve more than the minimum standards. Parents and pupils want improvements to happen quickly and the Government shares this view.

What the public said:

How is the Government using mentoring and positive role models in schools to actively engage with young people to prevent them from committing crime?

The Government response:

The Government's *Quality Choice and Aspiration Strategy* sets out a range of measures to increase mentoring opportunities between schools, businesses and higher education in order to inspire young people. In addition, the Government has invested heavily in youth crime prevention and tackling serious youth violence, with over £100 million committed to the Youth Crime Action Plan alone.

What the public said:

What is being done to raise aspiration in our children and young people to enter employment?

The Government response:

The Government is taking a number of actions to ensure young people are equipped with the skills they need to enter the labour market. This includes changing the qualifications system so that everyone can benefit from learning programmes; raising the age that young people must stay in education and training to 18; providing apprenticeships for 16-18 year-olds, and providing support to unemployed 18 year olds to help them make a successful move to employment quickly.

What the public said:

How is the Government tackling the three-plus generational cycle, where the view that people are better off on benefits is being passed down through families to young people?

The Government response:

The Government is committed to ensuring that everyone has the chance of a job and that working age benefits provide effective support for people to return to work. The design of the current tax and benefit system means that there are very few circumstances in which an individual working 16 hours or more receives less money in work than they would receive in out-of-work benefits. The Better off in Work Credit that will roll out nationally from January 2011 will make sure that anyone who has been on out-of-work benefits for more than 6 months gains at least £40 per week when they go back to work. Also, there are a range of specific Government measures to tackle intergenerational worklessness. These include piloting 32 'Child Poverty' Family Intervention Projects (FIPs) which help with parenting, life skills, housing, mental health, drug and alcohol problems, getting children back into school and ensuring parents are ready for work.

What the public said:

What is the Government doing to support children throughout their childhood?

The Government response:

Every child should have the best start in life in order to reach his or her potential. That is why the Government has created Sure Start Children's Centres for every community; free early years provision for every three and four year old and in the Early Years Foundation Stage; and entitlement for all children to safe, high quality, play-based early learning and care. There are now over 20,400 schools providing access to Extended Services. These services can have positive effects on children, by enhancing self-confidence, improving relationships, raising aspirations and leading to better attitudes to learning.

What the public said:

What is Government doing to ensure that it is not overly focussed on meeting targets at the expense of educating?

The Government response:

The National Curriculum gives teachers, pupils, parents, employers and their wider community a clear and shared understanding of the skills and knowledge that young people will gain at school. It allows schools the flexibility to meet the individual learning needs of pupils. Through the National Curriculum and personalised help for pupils, such as Every Child a Reader, the Government is doing what is important to parents – helping all children to reach their potential by improving standards in schools.

What the public said:

Without imposing unnecessary measures, how does the Government plan to ensure that children are sufficiently safeguarded in schools, especially if the school is on two different sites?

The Government response:

Schools should identify and manage any health and safety risks that might arise from having two different sites. The potential risks will vary depending on local circumstances. The Government believes schools are able to identify what is relevant to them. The document *Safeguarding Children and Safer Recruitment in Education* sets out the arrangements that schools should make to ensure that they meet this duty. This can be downloaded from www.teachernet.gov.uk

What the public said:

What is the Government doing to ensure that those working with children in care and vulnerable children (e.g. social workers) are equipped with the skills they need to do the job?

The Government response:

The Government is committed to improving the skills and capacity of the social care workforce. The Social Work Task Force was set up to conduct a 'nuts and bolts' review of the profession, and recently made a number of recommendations that will help to drive forward improvements to enhance the capacity and skills of social workers working with children and families. The Government

has accepted all the taskforce's recommendations and will publish an implementation plan shortly. Improving the recruitment, training and support for those who work with children is a central theme in the Government's Care Matters reform programme.

What the public said:

Education should be about creating self reliant, confident individuals who can think on their own, rather than 'spoon-feeding' children information. What is the Government doing about this?

The Government response:

The new secondary curriculum, introduced in September 2008, and the proposed new primary curriculum, due to be introduced in September 2011, are both designed to enable all young people to become successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens. There is now reduced prescription over subject content and improved coherence between subjects. This will give schools more flexibility to provide pupils with personalised learning.

What the public said:

Will the Government consider offering finance and business education at GCSE level?

The Government response:

There are already a number of GCSEs available in this area. Their details can be found at <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/section96/>.

For students who want to take a broader programme of business and finance related learning there is also the new Business Administration and Finance Diploma, which started in September 2009 and will be nationally available from 2013. The diploma aims to provide a solid grounding in business skills for young people who are interested in a business career or hope to own their own business.

What the public said:

How does the Government plan to support students who would benefit from vocational skills training?

The Government response:

From 2013, most young people will access qualifications through one of four nationally available routes: apprenticeships, the diploma, GCSEs and A levels, or foundation learning. Each route offers a different learning style ranging from vocational to academic. Also, from 2013 there will be a national entitlement to the diplomas for 14-19 year olds and an entitlement to an Apprenticeship place for all suitably qualified post-16 learners.

What the public said:

How will the Government ensure that students are fully aware of the career opportunities in science and technology?

The Government response:

The Government has placed great emphasis on advising young people (and their teachers

and parents) of the huge range of careers available by studying Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects beyond GCSE. It has also developed the Futuremorph website (www.futuremorph.org) which shows the value of STEM subjects in the job market; and the Careers Awareness Timeline, an innovative project teaching pupils aged from 11–14 years old about STEM-related careers.

What the public said:

How does the Government plan to ensure that the careers services provided by schools are not overly focussed on promoting university courses, but identify and promote other employment opportunities with local businesses too?

The Government response:

The Education and Skills Act 2008 requires schools to provide impartial careers information and advice in the best interests of pupils. Guidance and a resources pack supporting this were published recently. Compliance with the statutory guidance will be monitored by the schools' inspectorate Ofsted.

What the public said:

Does the Government have any plans to ensure the education curriculum places more emphasis on equipping school leavers with key life skills - for example financial management, completing successful job applications and managing tenancy agreements?

The Government response:

Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) encompasses a number of discrete areas which equip young people with a range of life skills. These include careers education and financial capability. The Government has announced its intention to make PSHE compulsory due to the key role it plays in equipping children and young people with the knowledge and skills they need to lead confident, healthy and independent lives.

What the public said:

What is the Government doing to ensure young people who leave school at 16 have the right qualifications to gain employment?

The Government response:

The Government is raising the age that all young people will be required to be in education or training until the end of the academic year in which they turn 17 from 2013 and until they turn 18 from 2015. Therefore, young people who are working more than 20 hours a week will be required to participate in education or training part-time, for around a day a week. This will enable them to achieve recognised qualifications prepare them to progress further in learning or work. This is supported by the 14-19 Qualifications Strategy which sets out the Government's intention that by 2013, the majority of young people will access qualifications through one of four national learning routes: Apprenticeships, The Diploma, GCSEs and A Levels, or

Foundation Learning for those learning mainly at entry and Level 1. Each of these routes will guarantee learners' access to skills they need to progress and the value of this is consistently echoed by employers.

What the public said:

What does the Government do to help young people acquire the right work experience?

The Government response:

Work-related learning is a required element of the national curriculum. Almost all (95%) of 14-16 year olds undertake work experience lasting one or two weeks, amounting to over half a million placements a year. The Government is working on a new vision for work experience. Due to be published by September 2010, this will make it even better for young people.

What the public said:

Looking at the recent list of most improved schools only one of them is an academy. Why is this?

The Government response:

The top 100 sustained improvement secondary schools list compares results from 2006 with 2009. In 2006, there were only 37 academies open. Of these, only 21 had been open long enough to have results in that year. The 2009 results for academies when compared to last results for the predecessor schools show that there has been a significant improvement in GCSE results.

What the public said:

What can the Government do to mitigate the damage done to communities which lose their local school?

The Government response:

Decisions on changes to local school provision, including closures, are made at a local level under established decision making arrangements. The Government believes that this is entirely correct as those who are likely to be affected by the changes are consulted and their views taken into account. When deciding school closure proposals the local authority must consider a range of factors – including the impact on the community – before arriving at a final decision on whether or not to approve the proposals.

What the public said:

What is the future of the Gifted and Talented Programme?

The Government response:

The Government's commitment to supporting Gifted and Talented (G&T) learners to achieve their full potential remains undiminished. We expect that by the end of the spring term 2010 around one million such learners will have been identified. We are placing clear responsibilities on schools to identify and provide personalised support for G & T pupils which, from September 2011, will be underpinned by pupil and parent guarantees. Details of the new G&T arrangements can be found at:

<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/teachingandlearning/gandtpupils/>

What the public said:

Do schools have to report back on what they have done as part of the Gifted and Talented Programme?

The Government response:

There is no requirement to report back to the Government but schools will need to continue to demonstrate to their School Improvement Partner (SIP) and Ofsted, how they have 'developed' their G&T pupils. As part of their strategic planning, their local authority G&T lead may also wish to contact them for an update and to determine what support they will require.

What the public said:

Are pupils who are talented in a non-academic subject such as PE, but not in academic subjects, considered gifted by the Government?

The Government response:

There are a range of options available for gifted and talented learners in PE through The Youth Sports Trust's PE and Sport Strategy for Young People (PESSYP) Programme. The aim of PESSYP is to improve the recognition of and the support and provision for, gifted and talented pupils in PE and Sport.

What the public said:

Would the Government consider rebalancing the education system so that there is less focus on the gifted and talented students and more focus on assisting and motivating the under achievers and the less academic students?

The Government response:

The education system does not need re-balancing. Schools have never been asked, or encouraged, to divert attention away from any pupils and to focus specifically on their G&T learners. The Government is committed to ensuring that every child reaches their full potential and that they receive an education that is personalised to their individual needs.

What the public said:

There has been a huge investment for basic skills for up to 25s. Will the Government invest in adult education and those over 25?

The Government response:

Learners of any age can get full funding for basic numeracy and literacy skills and first full level 2 qualifications. The focus on these qualifications is to ensure all adults have the basic skills for sustained employment as well as helping them to support the educational performance of their children. Full funding is available to all on income-related benefits and there is a package of measures to boost the skills of those who are at risk of redundancy or who are unemployed. In total, Government will invest £3.4 billion in skills for people aged 19 plus in 2010-11.

What the public said:

Is the Government providing funding for adult learning as a first step to helping people back into work?

The Government response:

The Government announced in the Skills Investment Strategy that it will invest around £3.5 billion to support 3.4 million adult learning places in 2010-11. This represents a 2.9% increase over 2009-10. Part of this funding is to support programmes that directly help people back into work, such as the Employability Skills Programme which has run since 2006. Furthermore, in response to the downturn, Government has also committed around £350 million over two years (2009-2011) to provide the flexible training that people need to return quickly to sustainable employment.

What the public said: What does the Government plan to do to make improvements to the university tuition fees system in order to make fees more affordable and fairer?

The Government response: The Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance is currently underway, and will consider various options for the future of higher education funding, including fees policy. The review will take into account affordability for students and their families during their studies and afterwards. Any recommendations which the review makes will reflect the need to ensure that the

benefits of higher education are open to all who have the talent and motivation to succeed. Government does not wish to pre-empt the findings of the review, which is expected to make its recommendations in the autumn. More information can be found at www.hereview.independent.gov.uk

What the public said:

Does the Government plan to reduce the length of undergraduate courses from 3 years to 2 years? This would reduce the costs to the student.

The Government response:

Two year honours degrees are one example of the increased flexibility and variety we want to see in higher education, as set out in the *Higher Ambitions* strategy. However, we do not envisage them becoming the norm. They are targeted at a very specific group of students and are currently being piloted on a small scale basis in seven universities. Initial results show that students do benefit, and that the quality of learning and outcomes are equal to or better than traditional three year degrees.

What the public said:

How will the Government maintain university admissions if funding is being reduced?

The Government response:

There is no doubt that applications for higher education places will be greater in 2010 than 2009, as people recognise the long term benefits of a high level qualification. We

want as many people to benefit from higher education as are qualified and able to do so, but we will manage growth carefully. In the budget the Government announced funding of £270M for an additional 20,000 higher education places for 2010/11 in areas which will help us through the downturn - such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths and those areas recently identified by the UKCES national skills audit. There will be more students benefitting from a university place than at any time in our history.

What the public said:

What is the Government doing to give students applying for places in universities confidence that there will be jobs available when their courses have been completed?

The Government response:

Economic policy has seen employment remain high, even through a recession and unemployment has stayed low compared to previous recessions and compared to other countries affected by the current recession. In addition, a degree remains a worthwhile long term investment, and graduates fare better in the labour market than non graduates. The Graduate Talent Pool - www.graduatetalentpool.direct.gov.uk - is one way in which the Government is providing real help for recent graduates by providing internships to help them enhance their skills. The Government also has recently announced the creation of an online national internship service to help undergraduates and graduates access

opportunities and information to develop their employability skills.

What the public said:

What plans does the Government have to support young people and give them aspirations to go to university?

The Government response:

The Government is committed to widening participation and ensuring fair access to higher education. We are already supporting pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to help them pursue higher education through the Aimhigher programme. We are also raising pupils' aspirations and attainment via the Aimhigher associates programme, through which existing university students mentor young people at school and college through key educational transitions such as the UCAS application process.

What the public said:

The increase in fees makes it difficult for potential students from disadvantaged backgrounds as they can't get financial support from home. What plans does the Government have to support these people?

The Government response:

There is currently no evidence to suggest the introduction of variable tuition fees has deterred those from disadvantaged backgrounds from going to university. The numbers of students going to university from disadvantaged backgrounds continues to rise and recent research shows that youngsters in

the poorest areas are 30% more likely to go to university than they were five years ago. In 2010-11 Government expects to spend around £6 billion on student support, and is committed to widening participation and fair access to higher education.

What the public said:

What is the role of university research in the region? How will the Government help students who missed out on places this year?

The Government response:

The North East can boast excellent university research. It has two research intensive universities in the world Top 100, and two of the Top 20 recipients of university research funding in the UK. The North East's universities work with regional partners to make a difference to their region, as demonstrated by initiatives such as the North East Technology Park (NETPark). Those students who missed out on getting into university this year should not feel that they have exhausted their options. Further education colleges and apprenticeships can provide a preparation for the world of work that compares in its excellence and market value to the best of our universities.

What the public said:

How can Scotland afford to have a higher education system with no university tuition fees, yet England can't?

The Government response:

Devolution allows devolved administrations to adopt policies in some areas which they believe are best for their populations. In Scotland, the student support package is targeted at low income students, with the parents of middle and higher income students expected to provide a significant financial contribution. While it is true that Scottish students do not have to pay tuition fees, the package of financial support is different in comparison to England. English students have more funds to live on while at university than their Scottish counterparts, and are therefore less likely to resort to expensive commercial debt.

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

What the public said:

Does the Government plan to increase openness and transparency with regard to planning decisions?

The Government response:

Guidance on planning is provided by the Local Government Association, and was recently updated in May 2009. As part of the current consultation paper on *Development Management*, the Government has set out a draft statement on the principles guiding the decision making of planning applications. These included ways to maintain and encourage openness and transparency for the community. In addition, the Government is also introducing a new requirement for local authorities to publish information about planning applications on their websites.

What the public said:

Councillors and planners need more and better advice on how to deal with planning applications. How does the Government plan to deliver this?

The Government response:

The Government is keen to ensure that elected members are positively encouraged to make use of the opportunity they have to maximise their role as local representatives and provide civic leadership. As a result the Government has funded capacity building activities for both planners and Councillors. These include training and support provided by the Planning Advisory Service (PAS), The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) and the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA).

The Government is currently consulting (as above) on requiring local authorities to put in place appropriate mechanisms to ensure that elected members can take part in discussions on development proposals at all relevant stages.

What the public said:

Glaxo and Nissan were given as examples in the North East of wind turbines being located at the site of the energy use. Does the Government plan to use the planning system to help this become the norm?

The Government response:

The Government's planning policies already expect local councils to encourage developers to incorporate local renewable and low carbon energy into their developments. Local policies should set out clear expectations on the use of local energy. The Government has recently consulted on proposals for certain micro-renewable technologies that would not require planning

permission. This will make it easier for people to go green.

What the public said:

Does the Government plan to move away from a city-centric focus on tackling deprivation, and to develop a more sophisticated policy approach designed around the needs of some rural communities which haven't changed in 30 years?

The Government response:

The Government is concerned with disadvantage and deprivation wherever it occurs. In most cases local authorities are best placed to lead multi-agency responses to the problems of concentrated disadvantage. Where that disadvantage is strongly concentrated the Government has taken steps to provide resource, direction and regeneration expertise via the Homes and Communities Agency and Regional Development Agencies. This is on top of additional funding to local authorities, for example under the Working Neighbourhoods Fund and Local Enterprise Growth Initiative £48 million goes to rural local authorities.

What the public said:

How does the Government plan to ensure services are designed around local needs?

The Government response:

The Local Performance Framework ensures that local authorities and their service delivery partners (such as Jobcentre Plus

and NHS Trusts) are designing services around local needs and priorities. Local councils, and councillors, are key to making sure that local public services are responsive to the needs of their local communities. To properly fulfil this role, the Government is working to ensure that they are fully equipped with the powers they need to act decisively and effectively on behalf of local residents. This includes, for example, the power to scrutinise, influence and shape other services.

What the public said:

How does the Government plan to encourage more involvement and engagement of economic, social and environmental partners in local democracy?

The Government response:

The Local Performance Framework focuses attention on how authorities work with local partners. Named partners have a duty to co-operate on, and have regard to, the targets that are negotiated in each local authority area. These targets represent the agreed top priorities for each individual locality.

What the public said:

How will the reductions to council budgets impact on the delivery of services, and as a consequence to local businesses?

The Government response:

Since 1997, the Government has increased the total grant to local authorities by 45% in real terms (up to 2010-11). This provides 13

straight years of above inflation increases in grants for authorities overall. Over the current three year settlement, we are providing an additional £8.6 billion to local government - this is an average 4% cash increase per year in funding. No decisions have been taken on future spending plans, for 2011-12 onwards. However it is clear that local authorities, in line with the rest of the public sector, will need to deliver continued efficiency gains which will be key to managing local budgets. Councils are best placed to make sure that public services are being efficiently and effectively delivered for local businesses.

What the public said:

How does the Government plan to ensure that through devolution to the local level, the right decisions can be taken at the right level?

The Government response:

The Government has already brought about a big shift in the balance of power between central and local government. Most recently, this has included a reduction in red tape for local government, with big cuts to performance measures and inspection, and greater flexibility for local decision makers on how money is spent. Local authorities also have greater powers to act for the benefit of their local communities.

What the public said:

How does the Government feel about a partnership approach to the delivery of public services?

The Government response:

Government is committed to increasing devolution in the delivery of public services, and joining up the activities of different local service providers. Partnership arrangements across the public, private and third sectors, including Local Strategic Partnerships, have a key role in supporting more joined up public services that meet both local and national priorities effectively. For example, Total Place has started to demonstrate how local partners can work together to deliver better outcomes and improved value for money.

What the public said:

How does the Government plan to open up local authorities and increase transparency in decision making?

The Government response:

In April 2009, the Government introduced a "duty to involve" requiring local authorities to inform, consult and involve the people they serve. The Government has also legislated on a petitions duty which will give people who live, work and study in an area the right to a public response if they sign a local petition. Local authority overview and scrutiny can also be a powerful tool for empowering communities and enabling local people to engage with their democratically elected representatives to have a real say.

What the public said:

At a time when funding is being cut, it is recognised that local authorities need to

make tough choices in relation to service provision, and local people would like to understand why certain decisions are being made. Does the Government have any plans to encourage local authorities to do this?

The Government response:

Delivering more and better services, without loading the taxpayer with greater costs, requires a significant and collective shift in approach, with local partnerships leading the way. Total Place is an ambitious initiative that has seen 13 pilots across England develop great, innovative ideas on how to give local areas more control over spending decisions, in order to meet specific local priorities.

What the public said:

What plans does the Government have to encourage shared services in rural areas; for example encouraging local organisations to create car or taxi pooling to minimise isolation?

The Government response:

The Government is clear that greater joining up across the public sector is a key way of delivering more efficient, more effective public services. Councils and their partners are uniquely placed to lead service transformation on behalf of their local communities. They are supported to do this by national and regional frameworks including the Local Government Delivery Council (LGDC), regional improvement and efficiency partnerships (RIEPs) and the Local Improvement Awards scheme. The

Government encourages local authorities and their partners to share their knowledge and experience to deliver more joined up services.

What the public said:

Planning is too bureaucratic and is killing communities in rural areas. Does the Government plan to cut bureaucracy?

The Government response:

In keeping with the recommendations of Matthew Taylor's *Review of Rural Affordable Housing and Economies*, the Government has already created a more strategic, clear and focused planning framework by bringing together the planning policy statements covering economic development topics into a single new *Planning Policy Statement (PPS) on Planning for Prosperous Economies*. The Government continues to support local authorities to achieve the right balance between protection and development in the countryside. It has also recently announced that 36 rural councils will benefit from £1 million funding for expert support to help design and plan up to 10,000 new homes.

What the public said:

How does the Government plan to address the lack of affordable housing in rural areas?

The Government response:

This is a key priority. In 2007 the Government commissioned Matthew Taylor MP to undertake a review on the rural economy and

affordable housing, and most of the recommendations were accepted. To address the identified need for more affordable housing, Government has recently consulted on a proposal to incentivise landowners to bring forward more land for rural affordable housing. On 19 February the Government also named the 36 rural councils that will benefit from £1million funding to help them design and plan up to 10,000 new homes, including affordable homes to meet local needs, in rural areas. More details are available here:

www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/1475334

What the public said:

Students in Newcastle are being pushed into high-rise ghettos of purpose-built accommodation and the local authority is using Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) legislation as an excuse to not to improve the situation. How does the Government plan to ensure student housing is appropriate?

The Government response:

It is for local authorities to devise strategies for meeting housing need in their area. However, to support them in this the Government recently announced measures designed to give them better tools to deal with the effects on communities of undue concentrations of HMOs in any particular area. Government has also strengthened the powers for local authorities to bear down on poor management of HMOs by landlords.

What the public said:

How does the Government plan to address the problem of deteriorating council houses?

The Government response:

Since 2001, 1.4m council houses have been improved to make them vastly better homes. In that time the Government has invested £18.8 billion with councils adding a further £4.4 billion and every council is committed to its Decent Homes programme. As a result of the programme, 86% of social homes nationally are now decent, and we expect that figure to rise to 92% by the end of 2010. The Government remains fully committed to completing the Decent Homes programme. Once completed, it expects this standard to be maintained in the future. We will also improve the common areas of estates and will ensure that there is sufficient funding in the new system to do so.

What the public said:

How does the Government plan to ensure that the Supporting People Programme is still able to provide the necessary support, despite pressures on its budgets?

The Government response:

The Government has removed the ring-fence from the Supporting People grant, providing local authorities with flexibility at a time when it is more important than ever. It enables the pooling of budgets to help drive innovation and deliver better outcomes through personalised services. The Government is equipping local authorities with the tools to

enable them to demonstrate the benefits of local investment.

What the public said:

What is the Government doing to develop the medium and long term capacity of the North East?

The Government response:

The new regional strategies introduced by the Government are one of the key means for improving regional sustainable economic growth over the next 15-20 years. It will improve the economic capacity of the region in the medium and long term by restructuring and developing the region's strengths, supporting its growth and competitiveness in the future, and promoting the sectors which are likely to drive growth. These include process industries, new and renewable energies and healthcare. Good progress has already been made by One North East and the Association of North East Councils on preparatory work for the new North East Strategy. The Government Office has been working closely with the regional bodies to ensure that it is on a sound footing.

ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT

What the public said:

Can the Government do more to encourage and support local campaigns to encourage the production, use and consumption of local food?

The Government response:

The Government has contributed funding to the Eat Seasonably campaign, which encourages people to increase the amount of locally in season produce they buy. Advice on what is in season can be found on the campaign website

<http://www.eatseasonably.co.uk>. Funding is also being made available by the Regional Development Agencies to support a range of local food initiatives including individual food producers and retail outlets, food hubs and farmers' markets. Retailers are already responding to the increased interest in locally produced foods, and it is consumer demand that will dictate whether more produce is marketed locally.

What the public said:

In the Government's opinion, what will sustainable agriculture in 2030 look like?

The Government response:

We expect to have a thriving farming sector that makes a positive contribution to the environment. Soil quality; water availability and quality; and biodiversity are the finite natural resources on which food production depends. Agriculture also needs to be economically sustainable with more farm businesses successful and profitable, producing high quality food to the high environmental and animal welfare standards the public expects. It needs to be quick to respond to the market, innovative and enterprising, highly flexible and resilient and serious about skills.

What the public said:

Will the Government use funding to incentivise some of the new technologies associated with Defra's Food 2030 Strategy, to ensure the strategy's sustainability?

The Government response:

The Government has already announced a new innovation platform of up to £90 million over 5 years for the agrifood sector. This will bring the government, businesses and researchers together to stimulate the development of new technologies that will increase food productivity while decreasing the environmental impact of the food and farming industries. In addition, the Government provides incentives for anaerobic digestion through the Renewable Obligation, the Renewable Transport Fuel Obligation, the feed-in tariffs for small scale renewable electricity generation and the

renewable heat incentive, plus various other various grant schemes.

What the public said:

How does the Government plan to make waste management more sustainable? New legislation affecting waste management sites impacts on businesses by creating more paperwork. In addition, the new pricing structure for composting set by the Environment Agency and the cost of licences, which have risen from £500 to £900 per licence have had an effect.

The Government response:

The Government seeks to make waste management more sustainable primarily through a range of measures implementing the Waste Strategy for England 2007. The Waste Strategy implements the 'waste hierarchy' which seeks to prevent waste in the first place and re-use, recycle and recover more waste where it is produced. Waste recovery and disposal operations are regulated by the Environment Agency through a system of permitting and registered exemptions from the need for a permit. Permits are subject to the fees and charges sufficient to recover the costs of the Agency's regulation. The Government has provided exemptions for a wide range of small-scale waste operations including community composting. These are not subject to fees or charges or any additional paperwork or record-keeping requirements.

What the public said:

Due to re-definition of upland land classification boundaries, the Rural Payments Agency has been slow to get payments out. This is causing distress and hardship to hill and upland farmers, who are already faced with increased feed costs and cash flow problems due to the bad winter. How can the Government support these farmers?

The Government response:

The Government met both its formal payment targets for the 2009 Single Payment Scheme ahead of schedule and has now paid over 90% of farmers. It is working hard to finalise checks on the remaining claims and is aiming to pay farmers as quickly as possible. This includes around 200 upland farmers who need additional work to their claim before it can be paid because of re-designations of the Severely Disadvantaged Area/moorland line. The Government will pay any money which is due as soon as the required work has been completed. The Government is committed to supporting upland farmers in England. This is why it has launched the new Upland Entry Level Stewardship Scheme to reward farmers for environmentally beneficial land management practices, with the first agreements starting from 1 July 2010.

What the public said: Renewable energy policy seems to place an emphasis on wind power. What is being done to encourage alternative renewables?

The Government response:

The Renewable Energy Strategy (RES) sets out the Government's comprehensive action plan for achieving the UK's share of the EU 2020 renewable energy target. All renewable energy technologies have a part to play to deliver on this target. The Government launched the Office of Renewable Energy Deployment (ORED) alongside the RES to speed up the deployment across the range of renewable energy technologies, and support is offered in many different ways and through different schemes. For example, since 2000, £100 million has been committed to supporting wave and tidal technologies, £10 million for the Anaerobic Digestion Demonstration Programme and £131 million for low carbon renewable heat through the Low Carbon Buildings Programme.

What the public said:

Will the use of new green technologies be enough or does the Government plan greater support and investment for the new green industries?

The Government response:

The Government has committed £555 million to support the development of key low carbon industries within the UK where we have a comparative advantage. This funding is being distributed to a range of sectors including offshore wind and low carbon vehicles. This is in addition to the £400 million provided in the Environmental Transformation Fund, which started in 2008, for the demonstration and pre-commercial deployment of low

carbon energy and energy efficiency technologies. In addition, the Government is seeking to provide favourable market conditions and business support for low carbon industries, and to encourage proactive collaboration between those investing in innovative green technologies. Furthermore the Government has trebled the money it provides to support academic research on accelerating the commercialisation of new technologies through the Research Councils. This amounts to £300 million between 2008 and 2011.

What the public said:

Should the Government encourage banks to invest more in green technologies?

The Government response:

The Government is putting in place the necessary measures to drive the investment needed in green technologies. This includes the Renewables Obligation and, from 1 April, Feed-In Tariffs. Together they aim to increase renewable electricity from 5.5% to over 30% of total electricity consumption by 2020. The Government has provided direct support to encourage innovation in low carbon technologies by allocating £405 million for low carbon technologies and advanced green manufacturing, and an additional £150 million for low carbon projects through the Strategic Investment Fund. As potential investors in low carbon technologies are diverse the Government is making investing in the sector more attractive

for all, rather than specifically targeting banks.

What the public said:

Why are there so many objections to wind turbines?

The Government response:

Research indicates that most people do support wind energy. It also shows that over the last few years when the UK has seen a big expansion in onshore wind, that level of support has not changed. The Government has made clear that wind farms should be located in appropriate places and that all renewable energy developments must take place within the formal planning procedures, allowing people to put forward their views.

What the public said:

Following the Copenhagen talks, what are we doing to work towards a future agreement?

The Government response:

Although Copenhagen did not deliver a legally binding agreement, the Copenhagen Accord provides a platform on which to build in the future. The Government is working with other countries to take forward elements that can be quickly implemented, such as the High Level Advisory Group on sources of climate finance, to show that action is happening. The Government will continue to work through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process to seek agreement on the key elements of an international agreement at the

next Conference of the Parties negotiations (COP16) in Mexico, leading to a treaty.

What the public said:

Following the recent media coverage of the climate change data used by the University of East Anglia, how will the Government lead the fight in convincing the public that climate change is a threat to human kind? How will it support NGOs in responding to the allegations that climate change does not exist?

The Government response:

Ultimately, it is scientists who tell Government about the risks of climate change, and how these can be managed. What Government can do is help explain to people what the science tells us, and what that means for people's own lives. The Government's work with the Act on CO2 campaign is one example of this. It isn't just about communicating the risks of climate change – it's about the opportunities too. Government needs to ensure people understand that tackling climate change will bring opportunities for the UK. The Government also welcomes the work that other groups are carrying out to help people to engage with climate change science.

What the public said: How does the Government plan to mitigate the effects of the installation of wind turbines on the landscape?

The Government response:

The Government's policy is to ensure that wind turbines are appropriately sited. It also works to ensure that the planning system plays its role in taking on board the legitimate concerns of local communities and upholds appropriate safeguards for our landscape and natural heritage. The Planning Policy Statement on renewable energy highlights the need to take account of environmental impacts, which will vary on a case by case basis according to the type of development, its location and landscape setting. Similar guidelines are in place for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Details are available at: www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/what_we_d_o/uk_supply/energy_mix/renewable/planning/plan_policy/plan_policy.aspx

What the public said:

Information available on wind speeds in various locations was thought to be inaccurate. What is the Government doing to improve available information?

The Government response:

The Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) hosts a wind speed database on its website. This is freely accessible and gives estimates of the annual mean wind speed throughout the UK based on an aerodynamic model. The data was created in the early days of wind energy deployment, when little information was available about the overall distribution of wind speeds in the UK. The DECC website makes clear that this database is now being

provided only as a very approximate indication of wind speeds. Any commercial wind energy development will need to be based on real, on-site measurements of wind speed which would normally be acquired by the developers.

What the public said:

Is the Government planning on making any new announcements on new nuclear power stations?

The Government response:

Nuclear power, alongside a sevenfold increase in renewable and investment in Carbon Capture and Storage, has a crucial role to play in achieving a low carbon future and securing the UK's energy supply and the Government is doing everything it can to facilitate new build here in Britain. The Office for Nuclear Development is taking active steps to establish the right conditions in the UK for investment in new nuclear power stations with the aim of having new nuclear generating electricity from around 2018. The Government launched a Nuclear National Policy Statement (NPS) consultation on 9 November 2009. The Government is scheduled to respond later this year to issues raised both in the consultation and through parliamentary scrutiny.

What the public said:

What is the Government doing to encourage government funded organisations to take action on tackling climate change?

The Government response:

The Government is introducing a carbon budget framework to manage reduction of the UK's emissions. As part of this, all government departments are committed to managing their own emissions and are also part of the CRC Energy Efficiency Scheme (previously known as the Carbon Reduction Commitment). The Carbon Trust provides support to the public sector to identify carbon reduction measures. Loans for the public sector to invest in energy efficient technologies are also available. In addition to this, £20 million is to be invested in innovative energy efficiency measures to cut emissions and energy bills in central government departments.

What the public said:

Is the Government considering financial incentives to encourage the investment required by individuals and businesses to make tackling climate change more viable?

The Government response:

The Government has announced an Energy Market Assessment. This will look at whether the current energy market arrangements will deliver the necessary investment to meet our emissions goals for 2050, while maintaining secure supplies and delivering a fair deal for consumers. The Government will look at a range of possible additional or alternative interventions that may be necessary to deliver our energy goals. In addition, the Feed-In Tariffs (FITs) scheme will be introduced on 1 April 2010 as a financial

support scheme for eligible low carbon electricity technologies aimed at small-scale installations.

What the public said:

How will the Government support the creation of the necessary infrastructure to make tackling climate change more viable?

The Government response:

The Energy Bill creates the framework for a new Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) incentive that will support a programme of four commercial-scale CCS demonstration projects. The incentive comprises a levy on electricity supplies (to be paid by electricity suppliers) and a mechanism for disbursing financial support to selected CCS projects. The collection of the levy and disbursement of funds will be administered by Ofgem, while the selection of projects will be carried out by the Government. The levy will be worth up to £9.5 billion over the next two decades. The details of the levy will be set through regulations that will be the subject of a consultation in summer 2010.

What the public said:

The photovoltaics technology has moved along rapidly in recent times and is likely to continue to develop at a fast pace. This makes businesses reluctant to invest at this stage when new technology could come on to the market soon. How will the Government encourage more businesses to invest in photovoltaics?

The Government response:

Feed-in tariffs are designed to encourage new installations and have fixed repayments over a number of years. This guaranteed reward for generating onsite renewable electricity, in addition to a further tariff for exporting electricity to the Grid, should encourage businesses as well as consumer and communities to invest in solar PV. The highest rates of financial return are awarded during the first two years, from April 2010. This should encourage early take up of these technologies.

What the public said:

Many traditional rural homes are difficult to insulate, and produce high utilities costs. How does the Government plan to assist people in these types of homes?

The Government response:

The Government recognises that due to the nature and dispersal of the housing stock there are particular challenges to delivering energy efficiency measures to rural communities. . The Government's intention is that there will be a range of support available to the householder. These will include eco-upgrades from the new energy supplier obligation in 2013; and the likelihood of finance, through a Pay as You Save loan, for more expensive measures, such as Solid Wall Insulation or small scale renewable technology.

What the public said:

Rural communities, without mains gas and/or electricity are disadvantaged. This is because oil heating isn't regulated like gas and electricity, and benefits such as dual fuel discounts are not available to oil users. How does the Government plan to support these communities?

The Government response:

With the government's support, Ofgem has encouraged the large gas distribution networks to connect deprived communities to the gas network. The government is taking action in the Energy Bill to ensure that, in the future, ministers have the powers to prevent discrimination against groups of consumers such as those off the gas grid. The Government aims to provide this support with energy costs in the form of a rebate on electricity bills.

EQUALITY

What the public said:

How does the Government propose to create a fairer society whilst cutting back on public finances?

The Government response:

The Government is working hard to tackle disadvantage and make society a fairer place to live. This is a particular priority in the current economic climate. The Equality Bill will introduce a new legal duty on key public bodies to consider how they will tackle socio-economic disadvantage in all the important decisions and actions they make. The Bill will mean that when planning services and focusing resources, a greater emphasis will be placed on those who are most disadvantaged.

What the public said:

If the Government is to strengthen the region's economy they should be looking to re-distribute wealth more equally by tackling health inequalities and working better across departments when setting policies. Does the Government have plans to address these issues?

The Government response:

The Government is firmly committed to tackling the barriers that unfairly hold people

back and prevent them from reaching their full potential. That is why the Government commissioned the National Equality Panel (NEP) report which shows how public policy (including tax and benefits) can help to decrease inequality. They also commissioned the Marmot review, which will be used as part of a Government strategy on addressing health inequalities. The NEP report shows the importance of the National Minimum Wage, Sure Start, tax credits and education spending in halting the rise in inequality. But there is more still to do. Our Future Jobs Fund is creating up to 110,000 jobs nationwide and the Government is continuing to boost apprenticeships. The Child Poverty Bill will enshrine in law our commitment to eradicate child poverty by 2020, and the Equality Bill will place a legal duty on all Government departments and key public bodies take steps to narrow the gap between the rich and poor.

COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY SECTORS

What the public said:

What is Government doing to support the third sector?

The Government response:

Latest figures from the National Council for Voluntary Organisations Almanac 2009 show that income from government to the third sector totalled £12 billion in 2006/7. This represents an all-time high and an increase of over £3.6bn since 2000/01. The Government recently published *Real Help for Communities: Volunteers, Charities and Social Enterprises*, an action plan worth up to £42.5 million to further support the sector during the recession. This is in addition to over £515 million we have committed over a three year period to support the third sector.

What the public said:

Does the Government plan to commit more long term funding support for community organisations working in areas where there have been decades of community

deprivation? Solutions to these problems require long term financial commitment.

The Government response:

The Government is committed to making three year funding the norm, rather than the exception. This will ensure that third sector organisations are able to plan ahead and deliver better and more innovative services to their communities. In 2008-09 the Minister for the Third Sector reported on the total value of grants for three years or more issued by central government departments. These figures showed that 85% of grants were for three years or more. In 2009-10, the Government broadened these figures to include grants and contracts issued by both government departments and non departmental public bodies. The figures showed that 83% of the total value was for three years or more, indicating that sustainable funding is embedded in government funding practice.

What the public said:

How does the Government plan to ensure that any future cuts in budgets for statutory organisations do not impact on the ability of Community and Voluntary services (CVS) to deliver?

The Government response:

The Compact, an agreement between government and the third sector which sets the framework for partnership working, has a clear set of commitments on how Government should manage funding

relationships with the third sector. This includes being open, transparent, honest, and giving due notice so that CVS are able to plan ahead and make contingency plans in the event of budget cuts. The Compact also has a commitment to ensure that funding, wherever possible, is for three years or more. This helps CVS to plan their work and provide the best possible value for money with their services. It also helps ensure that where cuts are necessary, there is time to build them into the business plan to mitigate the impact on delivery.

What the public said:

How will the policy of NHS as preferred provider affect Community and Voluntary Services?

The Government response:

The Government remains fully committed to opening up further opportunities for third and independent sector organisations across our public services and particularly in the NHS. The idea of the ‘NHS as the preferred provider’ does not represent a fundamental change to commissioning policy, but seeks a fundamental improvement in commissioning practice. The Department of Health expects commissioners to secure services from the providers best able to deliver the needs of their patients and populations. All types of providers should have a fair and equal opportunity to bid for new contracts.

What the public said:

How will smaller CVS bodies be protected at a time when the tendency appears to be to move towards bigger contracts for CVS services? How will the needs of the clients of CVS services be protected when negotiating contracts with the CVS?

The Government response:

The third sector received £12 billion in statutory income in 2006/7. According to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, nearly 25% of this funding was received by micro, small and medium third sector organisations. Furthermore, over £5 billion of the third sector’s statutory income is distributed at a local level. However, the Government recognises that some third sector organisations can find it challenging to become involved in larger scale contracts and it is undertaking initiatives to support third sector involvement. The Government is also working to improve the development and management of effective prime contractor public service markets, through the Third Sector Contracting Programme.

What the public said:

How does the Government plan to protect Third Sector organisations from cuts in public sector spending; increased taxation and reducing funding to local authorities?

The Government response:

So far government investment in the third sector has risen from £8.4billion to £12billion between 2001 and 2009. By investing in

Funding Central, an online one-stop shop for third sector funding opportunities, the Government is making it easier for these organisations to find sources of funding. However, following the lead of the national Compact introduced by central government, all local authorities have their own local Compacts. These set out the relationship between local authorities and the third sector. A key theme for most Compacts is a clear focus on ensuring that funding relationships are sustainable and based on honesty. Third sector organisations cannot be sheltered from the wider financial environment, but they can reasonably expect that they will be given opportunities to plan and prepare, so that they are able to make strategic choices to ensure their long term stability.

What the public said:

Would the Government consider relaxing the regulations governing voluntary organisations' ability to raise funds?

The Government response:

Certain aspects of charitable fundraising are regulated by legislation, to protect public trust and confidence in charitable fundraising, and to ensure that funds raised are used for the purposes for which they were donated. The Government also supports the Fundraising Standards Board which was set up by the sector to promote high standards and practices in fundraising. The Government will consider and respond to specific proposals for the simplification of regulations, which can be submitted through the Better Regulation

Executive's website
www.betterregulation.gov.uk

What the public said:

What is the Government doing to reduce administrative burdens on the third sector by local authorities?

The Government response:

The Office of the Third Sector published "*Principles of proportionate monitoring*" and the National Audit Office produced "*Intelligent Monitoring – an element of financial relationships with third sector organisations*". These help funders, such as local authorities, to be more proportionate in developing and implementing monitoring and reporting requirements. In addition, the National Audit Office is shortly to publish the "*Successful Commissioning Guide*". This guidance, targeted particularly at local authorities and primary care trusts, will help users tailor decision-making to make appropriate use of third sector partners and achieve better outcomes.

What the public said:

What is government doing to ensure that voluntary organisations are partners rather than servants of government, and are given sufficient independence when drawing down funding from local government?

The Government response:

The Government published a refreshed Compact between the public and third sectors in December 2009. This set the

framework for developing partnerships between government and the voluntary sector. It established key commitments and shared principles to help ensure that partnership working at all levels is a reality. A central principle is that of independence, so that third sector organisations remain free to pursue their interests whatever their relationship with government. In addition, National Indicator 7: An Environment for a Thriving Third Sector (NI 7) is one of 188 indicators used to measure the performance of local government. The indicator measures the contribution that local government and its partners make to the success of independent third sector organisations.

What the public said:

How can care sector organisations be more fairly represented on the Voluntary Organisations' Network North East (VONNE)? One North East and Government Office for the North East are important for CVS funding and development but their views appear to be overly represented on the VONNE.

The Government response:

VONNE, Government Office for the North East (GONE), and One North East work in close partnership to support the development and regional contribution of all parts of the third sector. VONNE has convened a health and social care forum for both third sector providers and regional health bodies to contribute to regional strategies and programmes. GONE and One North East

engage with the third sector through a number of different mechanisms, in addition to their partnership with VONNE. Also the directors of both GONE and One North East meet regularly with a strategic partnership of third sector leaders. This includes representation from Mental Health North East and they have provided valuable feedback on the impact of the recession on mental health in the region. The Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership is undertaking work on health and social care and the third sector are being engaged as part of this process.

What the public said:

What is the Government doing to ensure young people's views are represented in politics?

The Government response:

The Government's ambition is to ensure that young people have more opportunities to engage with the issues they are passionate about. We firmly believe they should be empowered as citizens, connected to the political process and offered a meaningful say in the decisions that affect them. The Government has already taken significant steps towards this goal. In line with recommendation 12 of the Youth Citizenship Commission's report published June 2009, the Government has established a series of youth panels who help to provide advice to Ministers on specific issues across government. It is encouraging to learn that 95% of schools have a youth council. This body often sits alongside the board of

governors and helps to formulate actions taken in the school and the community. National and local government are committed to ensuring that the views of young people are heard before making decisions that directly impact their lives.

What the public said:

Public sector recession is of concern, particularly as the public sector within the North East represents a high proportion of total employment. How does the Government plan to support public sector workers?

The Government response:

Over the last year, the Government has worked closely with public, private and third sector employers and trade unions to understand the good approaches and practices that employers can use to help them respond to the economic climate. This will help employers to use tools such as job design, training and skills development and flexible working arrangements amongst others, and to limit the recourse to redundancies. A set of Principles of Good Employment Practice will shortly be published along with guides to help support workforce wellbeing, engagement and productivity. The Government is also working in partnership with employers to promote the Skills Pledge, helping the public sector to develop skills and work opportunities for delivering quality public services.

BUSINESS

What the public said:

What can be done to incentivise business people to encourage more entrepreneurs?

The Government response:

Businesses play a vital role in encouraging people to set up their own business and there are a number of opportunities for them to do this. For example, the National Council for Graduate Entrepreneurship (NCGE) works closely with the Regional Development Agencies and universities to encourage more students and graduates to think seriously about starting a business, and provide help and business training to those who wish to do so. Existing businesses have an important role to play in this work through University Enterprise Networks. These aim to develop the entrepreneurship skills and mindsets of undergraduates by providing them with 'real life' experience of solving problems in the commercial world.

What the public said:

Does the Government have any plans to offer further financial support aimed specifically at graduate entrepreneurs, to ensure that businesses run by graduates have the best chances of survival?

The Government response:

The Government has introduced a range of financial measures to help all businesses through the global recession, and is continuing to provide help to promote growth during the recovery. Graduate entrepreneurs are able to access some of the support available, and programmes such as the Flying Start programme are available to help graduates who want to set up a business.

What the public said:

What initiatives is the Government introducing to boost and raise the profile of apprenticeships? These may include job release schemes where students combine studying with on job training, the "earn to learn" initiative and fiscal measures to encourage firms to take on more students.

The Government response:

The Government is taking a number of measures to encourage businesses to offer apprenticeships, including the establishment of the National Apprenticeship Service to help promote and expand apprenticeships and the Apprenticeship Grant for Employers which offers £2,500 to employers who offer apprenticeship places to unemployed 16 and 17 years olds. The Government also plans to create a modern class of technicians to secure our economic future and drive growth; to boost the numbers of advanced apprenticeships for young adults (19-30 year-olds); and to build stronger pathways into higher education from apprenticeships.

These include the development of an apprenticeship scholarship programme.

What the public said:

How does the Government plan to use the education system or community based initiatives to encourage entrepreneurs? Does the Government plan to wipe student debt for entrepreneurs as they do for teachers?

The Government response:

The Government funds a number of enterprise education initiatives through the English education system, including enterprise education in schools for Key Stage 4 (14-16yr olds); full-time enterprise and entrepreneurship qualifications through the National Skills Academy for Enterprise; and the Qualify with a Business programme in FE colleges (19+). In higher education, the Flying Start programme is offered to help university students and graduates who want to set up a business. An independent review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance is currently underway which will address a range of issues relating to the support available to students, and this will report later this year.

What the public said:

How will the Government prevent a 'post-code lottery' of gaining access to training from Job Centre Plus advice on the topic entrepreneurialism?

The Government response:

The Government introduced a new self-employment support package for all jobseekers from April 2009. It gives self-employment advice and financial support to those leaving Job Seekers Allowance and becoming self-employed. Other forms of self-employment support may be available as part of the Flexible New Deal programme, and the recent Budget announced the extension of the Young Person's Guarantee beyond March 2011, ensuring that young people adversely affected by the recession continue to be guaranteed training, work experience or a Future Jobs Fund job if they cannot find work within 6 months.

What the public said:

What is the current government thinking on apprenticeships in engineering?

The Government response:

Engineering apprenticeships are important in meeting the skill needs of employers in the sector. In the last three years the Government has supported 115,000 apprenticeships in engineering and manufacturing technologies in England. It will ensure engineering apprenticeships continue to be modernised and developed to meet the needs of emerging technologies including, for example, the new jobs being created in low carbon industries.

What the public said:

What is government doing to ensure that young people are equipped with the skills that businesses need?

The Government response:

The Government is reforming 14-19 education, ensuring provision is relevant, motivational, and leads to sustainable employment with the opportunity to progress. Apprenticeships, diplomas, foundation learning and general qualifications all equip young people with skills which are important for successful labour market outcomes. Young people aged 19-24 are entitled to free tuition for a first full level 3 qualification, on top of entitlements for all adults to free tuition for a first full level 2 and Skills for Life qualification.

What the public said:

The business community believes that vocational education should place greater emphasis on NVQ level 3, rather than on level 2. Does the Government have any plans to make this change?

The Government response:

We know there will be an increasing need to train people in advanced vocational skills at levels 3 and 4 in the coming years. These skills will be critical to the improved productivity on which economic success depends. Skills for Growth – the national skills strategy, published in November last year – has a number of commitments to

improve skills at this level, including expanding advanced level apprenticeships.

What the public said:

There need to be models of achievement in raising aspirations and educational attainment for others to follow. How does the Government plan to support this?

The Government response:

The Government has a range of initiatives to encourage both young people and adults to participate in education and learning and to increase their skill levels and make the most of their talents. The Aimhigher programme aims to inspire, motivate and encourage young people to consider higher education as a path to reaching life goals. It focuses on those from lower socio-economic groups and disadvantaged backgrounds who live in areas of relative deprivation where participation in higher education is low.

What the public said:

It is important to change the culture of the North East, and for people to have the confidence and ability to start their own businesses and reduce historical dependence on large public sector employers. How can the Government support this?

The Government response:

The Government wants more people to become entrepreneurs. This means continuing to foster a culture of enterprise, improving knowledge and skills, encouraging

business innovation and minimising the impact of regulation, as well as ensuring that small businesses can access the finance they need. Along with these measures, the Government is building a culture of enterprise by promoting, celebrating and raising awareness of entrepreneurship, primarily focused on reaching graduates, young people, women and other under-represented groups.

What the public said:

What are the chances of a successful bid for Corus? Why can't the Government nationalise Corus? If there were a viable solution for Corus, would the Government provide funding and what would the funding be for?

The Government response:

Discussions between Corus and potential bidders for the Teesside Cast Products plant are ongoing, but any decisions on the sale of the plant are commercial matters for the company. In order for the Redcar plant to recommence production there is a need not only for economically viable orders but also for a strategic partner willing to invest and take a significant proportion of the steel that Teesside is capable of producing each year. We are keen to support the company, and manufacturing more widely, through the economic downturn.

What the public said:

Could the Government have intervened sooner to save mothballing the plant?

The Government response:

The Government acted quickly to resurrect the off take agreement between Corus and an international consortium of steel buyers which collapsed in May 2009 and was one of the main factors behind the decision to mothball Teesside Cast Products. We have also been in regular contact with Corus and Tata at the highest levels to pursue every possible option that would secure the long term future of the plant.

What the public said:

International business decisions do not always focus on local impact. What is the Government doing to mitigate the effects of international decisions on the UK, and to support key manufacturing sectors?

The Government response:

Although local impact may be one of the issues taken into consideration by global companies when making international business decisions, the primary consideration is generally securing the long-term viability of the company. When decisions are taken to close plants, the Government works to mitigate the effects on the local economy by helping those who have been made redundant to get back into work as quickly as possible, and by helping the dependent local supply chain to identify new customers.

What the public said:

How will the Government offer support to the region as well as Corus workers and help generate future demand for steel?

The Government response:

We have announced over £60 million investment in the North East to support the region's industrial transition to low carbon and advanced manufacturing. The overall package will create an estimated 3,000 new jobs and sustain over 10,000 jobs long term. The Corus Response Group is helping those workers affected with retraining and finding new employment. The Government has also brought forward billions of pounds worth of infrastructure spending across the UK and extended the automotive scrappage scheme to stimulate demand for steel.

What the public said:

Are there any meetings planned in the near future with Corus/Tata?

The Government response:

Ongoing contacts with Corus and Tata will be maintained both at ministerial and official level.

What the public said:

What is the Government's view on the accusations that Corus do not want to sell the plant?

The Government response:

Discussions between Corus and potential bidders are continuing and we hope that these will result in an outcome that secures the long term future of the plant. We have been assured that the mothballed iron and steel making equipment and plant would be maintained with a view to reinstating

production quickly if a long term solution for the site can be found in the future.

What the public said:

Does the Government have any initiatives to help solve the problems of social and economic deprivation in the rural parts of East Cleveland, following the closure of iron stone mines?

The Government response:

One North East is responsible for the delivery of the socio-economic elements of the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) in the North East. This includes the Tees Valley RDPE Business and Community Assets fund, managed by Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council, and the North York Moors Coast and Hills LEADER Local Action Group, also supported by the RDPE. This group receives financial assistance to implement local development strategies by awarding grants to local projects, such as Community planning in East Cleveland, and Training Loftus which addresses identified skills gaps and provides a range of training opportunities to individuals in and around Loftus.

What the public said:

Many rural areas in Northumberland have poor access to services; in particular transport, broadband and mobile phone networks. How does the Government plan to address these issues?

The Government response:

The Government has committed public funds to improve broadband infrastructure in all parts of the UK. The commitment is to provide access to connections of at least 2Mbps and to provide Next Generation access for 90% of the UK. The European GSM Directive mandated the use of 2G/GSM services to encourage the growth of mobile services, and operators have exceeded this requirement on a voluntary basis. With regards to 3G licences, all five of the UK network operators are subject to a number of conditions, and the obligation to ensure that at least 80% of the UK population has access to mobile telecommunications services was met by all five of the operators in May 2008.

What the public said:

What should the future role of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) be?

The Government response:

RDAs will continue to take a strategic approach to regional economic management and actively support business and employment growth, focusing on measures that have maximum economic impact. They will help deliver our plans for a new 21st century British industrial revolution based on new technologies, new sectors and new markets which are going to be the main drivers of economic change in the future. They will take on more responsibility for setting plans for skills training in their regions, which is a vital key to future growth. They will work with local businesses and universities

and colleges to ensure the economy gets maximum benefit from their research and innovation.

What the public said:

Why has the RDA contributed £30 million to the Teesside Industrial Programme?

The Government response:

The effects of the recession, coupled with global restructuring, have had a significant negative impact on the economy and people of Tees Valley. Because of these impacts, support to industry and surrounding areas was seen as a major priority for Government and One North East. As a result the Tees Valley Industrial Programme (TVIP), a £60 million programme of support to accelerate the industrial transformation of Tees Valley, was agreed. This included a £30m contribution from the RDA. The programme of activity will create an estimated 3,000 new jobs in the short to medium term and sustain 10,000 jobs long term.

What the public said:

The same advice and procedure is offered to small business as well as big business. The bureaucracy and form filling required of both business sizes is similar, but impacts more on small and medium enterprises as a greater percentage of their time needed. Could a solution be to devolve the licensing system to regions or sub-regions to give local flexibility?

The Government response:

Government is aware that when preparing guidance for business, one size does not fit all. Consequently it has developed free tools available from the Business Link website - www.businesslink.gov.uk - to help micro and small businesses comply with regulations. The Business Link website can also provide small businesses with a "tailor-made" list of regulations that are linked to plain English guides. Businesses can also sign up here for free e-mail alerts as and when a regulation changes. In terms of the licensing system, many licences are already issued locally through local authorities. Further suggestions for devolving licences can be registered at www.betterregulation.gov.uk

What the public said:

How does the Government ensure that despite developing the low carbon and green economy there is not an over reliance on 'big industry', which could repeat the risk of major job losses over the long term as markets change?

The Government response:

In *New Industry, New Jobs*, the Government's industrial strategy for Britain, we published sector strategies outlining actions for developing a number of areas which are fundamental to our future success. This includes the Low Carbon Industry, but also Life Sciences, Digital Britain, Advanced Manufacturing, Composites, and Plastic Electronics. In *New Industry, New Jobs* we aimed to identify markets that offer

significant opportunity for high value added employment or growth in Britain and where the Government can have a positive impact in unlocking the competitive potential of firms and workers.

What the public said:

How does the Government plan to increase business support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) - for example by providing better access to finance, advice and raw materials?

The Government response:

A comprehensive list of business support is available via the Business Link website www.businesslink.gov.uk. This includes Solutions for Business, a package of publicly-funded support products offering help to businesses to start and grow. These comprise measures to help small businesses access the finance they need, and advice to businesses considering exporting. The package of products is flexible and has been designed to adapt to future business needs. The Government continues to work with the business representative bodies to understand what support is required and to develop new support measures when needed.

What the public said:

Does the Government have any plans to offer business support finance in return for business equity, then once business is profitable, swap profits for equity – allowing initial experience to be gained?

The Government response:

UK Finance for Growth, launched in the recent Budget, brings together all existing debt and equity Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) finance products into a single, coherent portfolio. This includes Enterprise Capital Funds, intended to address the equity gap faced by many small but potentially high growth SMEs (between £250,000 and £2 million). As well as Enterprise Capital Funds, established during the recession as part of the Real Help for Businesses Now programme, investing in sound UK based SMEs that are currently unable to access the funding they need. A Growth Capital Fund has also been announced, which will aim to deliver flexible equity and mezzanine investments in SMEs between £2 million - £10 million.

What the public said:

Many small businesses do not approach Businesslink for guidance due to their informal nature. How does the Government get the balance right so that small businesses are comfortable to ask for advice but not put off by an informal approach?

The Government response:

Government recognises that individual businesses prefer different ways of getting advice. This is why Business Link offers support and advice by phone, 'face to face' with an advisor, at workshops/seminars, and online. This approach has enabled nearly 1 million customers to use the Business Link service delivered by the RDAs in the last 12

months, with over 200,000 calls to the national Business Link enquiry line, and around 14 million visits to the website. Recent figures showed around 90% of customers were satisfied with the service they received.

What the public said:

Education is one way that can help older people keep active and therefore lead a more independent life. Does the Government plan to give more consideration to older people who want to re-skill?

The Government response:

All of our adult education and training programmes are age-neutral and open to everyone who wants to reskill. These include Train to Gain; the support of Union Learning representatives, who are active in the workplace and in the wider community; the right for employees to request time off to train; and access to free literacy and numeracy courses for adults, as well as free tuition to undertake a first level 2 qualification. We continue to protect funding for personal, family and community development learning at £210 million a year and have added a further £10 million a year through to 2010/11 to expand family learning programmes and intergenerational learning opportunities.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

What the public said:

How can we ensure that older people get the right services and feel confident to challenge the relevant authority when this does not happen?

The Government response:

In 2007 the Government published Putting People First. This sets out the Government's vision for adult social care to enable people to have the best quality of life and equal access to opportunities for independent living. The Government has given councils £520 million to spend to make their social care services more personalised. Older people have the right to challenge and take up complaints with the service provider and all regulated providers are required to operate effective complaints procedures. The Green Paper Shaping the Future of Care Together published in July 2009 sets out the Government's continued commitment to build a National Care Service for all adults in England that is fair, simple and affordable.

What the public said:

It is better if elderly people do not go into residential care but there need to be good support services to maintain people in their

own homes. What plans does the Government have to support this?

The Government response:

People who need care consistently say they want to live at home, with the right support. Local authorities are increasingly helping them do this, backed with increased Government funding, for example through new technologies and more community based response teams. The proposals in the Government's Personal Care at Home Bill will benefit around 400,000 people with the highest care needs. This intensive help or "re-ablement" will help people to regain their independence and prevent ill health. The Bill guarantees free personal care for those who qualify.

What the public said:

Carers need to be valued more highly and their circumstances - for example the fact that they often find it difficult to get out - need to be taken into account when training facilities and initiatives are being provided. What are the Government's plans to support carers?

The Government response:

Jobcentre Plus has up to £38 million available from the 2008 National Carers Strategy to support carers who wish to combine paid employment with their caring role. The new adult advancement and careers service will be launched shortly and will be available through a variety of routes. The online channel (which will include skills

accounts) and the phone service should help carers who want information on e-learning and distance learning, as they can access these without leaving the home.

What the public said:

Durham County Council is proposing to close care homes in Stanley, Consett, Annfield Plain and Lanchester. Where will existing residents live and how will they afford alternative accommodation?

The Government response:

The decision to close a care home is taken either by the local council or, if it is an independent care home, the proprietor. The Government is concerned that any home closure should be conducted sensitively and appropriately. If a care home is closed, the local authority has a statutory duty to arrange alternative accommodation for residents whose needs assessment indicates a need for residential care.

What the public said:

Whilst the Quality, Innovation, Productivity, and Prevention agenda is welcomed, the focus on targets (e.g. in A&E) tends to measure process rather than outcome. How will measures of quality be refocused on patient experience rather than meeting targets?

The Government response:

Patients and the public justifiably expect public services which are responsive to their needs and driven by them. Understanding

what really matters to patients and the use of this information to improve both service quality and patient experience now lies at the heart of NHS reform. For example, the national survey program, coordinated by the Care Quality Commission, is the one of the largest of its kind anywhere in the world, and ensures that patient experience feedback is systematically captured across the NHS and supports local service improvement. From this summer NHS Trusts will start to publish their public facing Quality Accounts, which will highlight and report on what is important for local populations. Additionally, a national library of indicators is being developed, which will include patient experience and aims to support quality improvement.

What the public said:

Meeting the four hour target in A&E often means failing the target for providing single sex accommodation. How can these conflicting demands be satisfied?

The Government response:

These are not conflicting demands - just two different elements of highly effective care. The goal of same-sex accommodation applies to all areas, regardless of the admission-route or the local pressure on beds. The Operating Framework for the NHS 2010-11, requires that Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) ensure all providers have published a declaration before the end of March 2010, that they have virtually eliminated mixed-sex accommodation. It also requires NHS care providers to have plans in place for continued

delivery of this commitment. We have always been clear that there will be financial consequences for those trusts who do not deliver on this area.

What the public said:

Clinical nurses who want to develop their career have little choice but to move into management because clinical aspects are seen as more junior. What steps will be taken to ensure long-term career pathways for nurses who wish to remain as clinicians rather than managers?

The Government response:

The Prime Minister's Commission on the Future of Nursing and Midwifery recommends flexible career structures, enabling staff to move across a variety of settings within existing roles or when they change jobs. We recognise the benefits of enabling skilled and experienced nurses to stay in clinical roles, providing direct care to patients. In November 2009 the Chief Nursing Officer launched the nursing career framework which demonstrates the diverse career opportunities for all nurses whether they wish to pursue clinical, managerial, educational or research roles. Nurses who choose to develop their skills in clinical roles such as the advanced practitioner, nurse specialist or nurse consultant can use the framework to help their own career development.

What the public said:

While the personalisation agenda is welcomed, how does the Government plan to ensure that it does not have a negative impact on mental health funding and development?

The Government response:

The Government wants mental health service users to benefit from personalisation in line with users of any other services. The evaluation of individual budgets pilots for social care showed that this was possible. As part of the Welfare Reform Act, the 'Right to Control' work (<http://www.officefordisability.gov.uk/working/right-to-control.php>) is building on this learning to take forward the principles of choice and self-directed support through a range of income streams. New Horizons: a shared vision for mental health (http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_109705) published in December 2009 commits the Government to continue exploring the options for expanding choice and personalisation.

What the public said:

How is the Government going to support Local Authorities and Health services to take a long term plan for tackling health inequalities?

The Government response:

The Government recognises that effective action on health inequalities requires long-

term planning at local, regional and national level. It commissioned Professor Sir Michael Marmot to undertake a post-2010 strategic review of health inequalities to look at the long term picture. Sir Michael's report, Fair Society, Healthy Lives, published on 11 February, emphasised that action is needed across all the social determinants of health on a sustained basis. The advice contained in the report will serve as the core of a long-term health inequalities strategy.

What the public said:

What do you see as the future of public involvement in social care and health?

The Government response:

To reinforce and promote involvement from the perspective of patients and the public, the new NHS Constitution gives everyone the right to be involved in the planning and delivery of healthcare services. In addition, Local Involvement Networks (LINKs) aim to give citizens a greater say in how their health and social care services are delivered. Run by local individuals and groups and independently supported, the role of LINKs is to find out what people want, monitor local services and to use their powers to hold them to account.

What the public said:

LINKs are funded from Department of Health money which is not ringfenced. There is evidence that local authorities are keeping part of the funding meant for LINKs. Why is funding not ringfenced and what does the

government think is the future for funding LINKs?

The Government response:

There is strong and continuing commitment to putting people at the heart of care and LINKs are seen as an important element and demonstration of that commitment. The LINKs annual reports for 2008-09 show that the majority of councils did pass on the most of the funds. The funding goes direct to local authorities but, in line with a cross-government drive to see greater accountability at the local level, this grant is not ring-fenced. We made it clear that the grant was intended for LINKs but it is not for us to tell authorities how to spend their allocations.

CRIME AND JUSTICE

What the public said:

What will be the effect of the cuts in police budgets? Will this impact on Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs), who are now considered to be an integral and effective part of the 'police family' and an important and invaluable resource? Will there be cuts in police overtime which is essential for operational effectiveness?

The Government response:

There has been a 60% increase in government funding for the police since 1997 including £259 million increase in 2010/11. In addition, the Government has made a firm commitment to protect funding for frontline police services up to 2013, including sufficient funding to maintain the current number of PCSOs. The 2009 *Policing White Paper* recognises that in some circumstances overtime is the right way to deal with an unexpected situation or major incident. However, there are other ways to ensure operational effectiveness such as ensuring the police are scheduled to work at the times when the public need them.

What the public said:

When the Government talks about workforce modernisation of the police force, what does it mean?

The Government response:

Workforce modernisation is about ensuring that the workforce size, mix and profile matches priorities to provide the best possible service to the public. This allows officers to focus on tasks requiring their full range of powers and training. Ensuring the right mix of police officers and staff at the frontline will generate greater effectiveness and efficiency. The National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) manages the workforce modernisation programme and their methodology is being tested in nine demonstration sites. The evaluation will be published shortly and we will work with police forces to consider how the findings can be applied in their local area.

What the public said:

Can the Government provide assurance that frontline officers won't be cut as a result of cuts in police budgets?

The Government response:

The Government made a firm commitment to protect funding for frontline police services. It has promised to provide sufficient funding until 2013 to enable Police Authorities to maintain the current frontline policing strength, specifically the number of warranted Police Officers, Police Community Support

Officers and other staff exercising police powers.

What the public said:

Has crime actually dropped given that people guilty of anti social behaviour are receiving penalty tickets rather than criminal sentences?

The Government response:

Tackling anti-social behaviour has been a top priority for this Government since 1997. The British Crime Survey, which is widely considered as the most authoritative indicator of crime trends, shows that those reports of high level anti-social behaviour fell from 21% in 2002-03, to 15% for the year ending September 2009.

Three independent reports including the Home Affairs Select Committee, the Audit Commission and the Nation Audit Office reports have confirmed the Government's approach to tackling anti-social behaviour is working. The introduction of Penalty Notices for Disorder has allowed the police to deal quickly and proportionately with minor low-level offences which do not merit prosecution at court, freeing them up to spend more time on frontline duties and tackling serious crime.

What the public said:

What measures are being implemented by the Government to address re-offending, at a time when there is an increasing prison population?

The Government response:

Re-offending has fallen by 20% since 2000 reflecting the Government's commitment to this agenda. Prison is fundamental to reducing crime and it is the right option for dangerous, serious and persistent offenders. This is why the Government is increasing prison capacity to 96,000 by 2014. However, less serious offenders are often better dealt with through tough community sentences, such as Community Payback, and Intensive Alternatives to Custody pilots. This is supported by probation Offender Managers and may include programmes to tackle behavioural issues. In addition, prison may not be appropriate for those with mental health issues and the Government remains committed to both the greater use of non-custodial sentences, and improved outcomes for victims, communities and offenders in reducing reoffending.

What the public said:

There are too many loopholes in the Licensing Act (2003), allowing shops to sell alcohol 24 hours a day. What is the Government planning to do about this?

The Government response:

The Government is empowering licensing authorities to ban the retail of alcohol between 3am and 6am where it is leading to problems in the local area. The provisions have been included in the Crime and Security Bill which completed its Commons stages on 8 March. The Bill will have its Second Reading in the House of Lords shortly and is

expected to receive Royal Assent before the current Parliament dissolves. The Act has been a considerable success in many areas, but the Government recognises that there is a need for such powers in areas where it has been less effective.

THE ECONOMY

What the public said:

What is the Government doing to encourage more people to save and to help savers who are seeing a narrowing of the gap between the Retail Prices Index and the interest rates offered by high street banks?

The Government response:

Over 19 million people now have an Individual Savings Account (ISA), and the estimated tax relief given through ISAs amounted to an estimated £2 billion in 2008/09. Meanwhile, around 4.8 million children now have a Child Trust Fund. The Saving Gateway will be introduced nationally and will offer around 8 million people the opportunity to receive 50 pence from the Government for each £1 they save.

In 1997 the Government gave the Bank of England independence to set interest rates. The interest rates offered on particular savings accounts are a decision for providers, however a number of banks and other institutions offer interest rates significantly above the Bank of England rate. Savers can ensure they get the best possible income from their savings by shopping around and using tools such as the Money Made Clear initiative (<http://www.moneymadeclear.fsa.gov.uk/>).

What the public said:

Can the Government guarantee stability on interest rates?

The Government response:

Since 1997 the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Bank of England has independence for monetary policy. Since March 2009, interest rates have been at 0.5 per cent, and it is expected that interest rates will remain at 0.5 per cent until the second half of 2010, as the low level continues to provide an economic stimulus. The Government will continue to support the Bank of England in the forward-looking decisions it takes as the economy strengthens. Within this, the MPC will decide the appropriate level for interest rates.

What the public said:

Large infrastructure projects and public projects such as the Olympic Games support the economy. What financial systems are in place to advance investment in these types of projects and will the Government commit to maintaining expenditure on large public projects?

The Government response:

The Government has announced its commitment to focus spending in the areas where it generates high economic returns in order to achieve maximum long-term benefit for the taxpayer. Infrastructure UK was set up to assist in this task by advising the Government on the priorities for infrastructure

investment. In terms of the Olympic Games, the Government is committed to ensuring the construction is fully funded.

What the public said:

Can the business decisions of banks currently in state ownership be influenced by Government to help realise a more favourable rates for savers?

The Government response:

Where there is public sector investment in financial institutions, these stakes are managed by UK Financial Investments Limited (UKFI) on the Government's behalf. UKFI is required to operate independently from HM Treasury, and manages the public's stakes in banks with the taxpayer's interests in mind. Therefore where public money has been made available to banks, the Government is not able to intervene in commercial matters such as pricing or product design. To do so would be contrary to independence, and may be anti-competitive or distort the market.

What the public said:

Could the banking institutions be directed to make their policies for lending money more open and transparent?

The Government response:

It is important that customers understand the products that are being offered to them so they can make an informed choice. To help achieve this, the Government has agreed customer charters with most of the major

lenders to UK businesses, including Barclays, RBS, HSBC, Lloyds Banking Group and Santander. This will help improve transparency around pricing of loans to over 98% of all businesses in the UK.

What the public said:

Small businesses are finding it difficult to get access to affordable finance, and although large businesses can get finance many have gone under. The banks need to start lending again. Can the Government do more?

The Government response:

The Government is committed to ensuring that Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) have access to finance. The Enterprise Finance Guarantee Scheme provides a 75% Government guarantee to banks to enable additional lending to SMEs. To date nearly 8,380 businesses have been offered loans totalling over £850 million. The Growth Capital Fund will be launched in 2010 and will provide finance for SMEs where bank finance is unavailable or inappropriate. In addition, the UK Innovation Investment Fund will offer £125 million for investment in clean technology, including low-carbon; and £200 million for investment in general technology.

What the public said:

What is the Government doing to change the perception that finance is not available, when in reality it is the process of accessing finance that is longer and the price of finance that is higher?

The Government response:

Banks have adjusted their practices to reflect a shift away from the irresponsible lending of the pre-crisis period. However, as a result of substantial increases in the cost of finance and the likelihood of default, many businesses are paying a higher margin on their loans. It is important that borrowers understand banks' lending practices so that they can make an informed choice. As mentioned above the Government has agreed customer charters with most of the major lenders to UK businesses, to improve transparency around the timing and pricing of loans.

What the public said:

Is the North East region too reliant on public sector employment? What percentage of the region's GDP comes from the public sector?

The Government response:

The Government is committed to achieving economic growth in all regions, as balanced economic growth is critical for the long-term prosperity of Britain. In the medium term, it is important that government activity positively contributes to the development of regional economies so that private sector investment is attracted and enhancing regional competitiveness is increased. The government's strategy for relocation and procurement will help achieve this.

What the public said:

Is the Government considering more quantitative easing and economic stimulus, whilst considering a qualitative deficit plan?

The Government response:

The Bank of England has operational independence for monetary policy under the framework put in place in 1997. At the request of the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC), the Chancellor authorised the Bank of England to purchase £200 billion of assets financed by the issuance of central bank reserves. It is for the MPC to decide the appropriate combination of interest rate and the scale of asset purchases needed to meet the Government's inflation target. The Committee said in February that it will continue to monitor the appropriate scale of the asset purchase programme, and further purchases would be made should the outlook warrant them. However, they also judged that the current asset purchase programme would continue to impart a substantial monetary stimulus to the economy for some time to come.

What the public said:

What is the Government doing to prevent a "double dip" recession?

The Government response:

The Government remains confident but cautious about future prospects for the economy, and will continue to support long-term sustainable growth and provide targeted economic support. While the latest data

shows that the economy is growing again, global risks remain. That is why the Government will continue to support businesses and families, as withdrawing the support that has helped us get to this point could threaten the recovery.

What the public said:

When will the rising unemployment peak?

The Government response:

Economic policy has seen employment remain high, even through a recession. In addition, unemployment has stayed low compared to previous recessions and compared to other countries affected by the current recession. As the economic recovery takes hold, employment is forecast to rise and unemployment to fall. The investment in employment support since 1997 coupled with additional funding put in place through the current downturn, has ensured more people are moving off job seekers allowance than in previous recessions. Taking these factors into account, the claimant count is projected to fall back to around 1.5million by the end of 2012.

What the public said:

What are the implications of public sector job losses in the North East region given the high proportion of public sector workers?

The Government response:

Departmental allocations for 2011-12 and beyond have not yet been fixed, and the Government has not set any headcount

reduction targets in the current spending review period (ending in 2010/11). Going forward, employment decisions will need to be taken by public sector employers in light of their operational needs and budget constraints. Pay restraint in the coming years will be important in helping protect frontline service delivery and jobs.

TRANSPORT

What the public said:

Does the Government have any plans to copy the Transport for London (TfL) model elsewhere in the country to reduce the current frustration over lack of control over public transport?

The Government response:

The Local Transport Act 2008 has made a London-style franchising or tendering system a real possibility in the rest of England, through the use of Quality Contracts. Different areas have different needs and the Government is committed to ensuring that the full range of options are considered by local transport authorities wishing to improve the bus services for passengers in their areas. Quality Contracts are very useful in bringing operators to the table to discuss transport partnerships. Examples of this can already be seen in partnership agreements recently put in place in Barnsley, Nottingham and Oxford.

What the public said:

Low car ownership in the North East increases reliance on public transport. What is the Government doing to ensure that the Passenger Transport Executive (PTE) is able to fully address the balance between making

profit and meeting social need on less profitable routes? This is particularly significant in remote rural areas.

The Government response:

In 2009/10 the Government made over £19 million in capital funding available to the Tyne and Wear area for general small transport improvements and a further £147,000 funding in rural bus subsidy grant. Funding is not ring-fenced and local authorities can spend their money on local priorities, which may include improving bus infrastructure and services in rural areas. In addition, the Local Transport Act 2008 will improve local bus services, give local authorities greater control over commercially operated bus routes, and reform local transport governance, especially in the bigger cities.

What the public said:

Public transport should be cheaper in order to encourage more people away from private transport. The Government relies on taxation as an incentive, but there are other options. How does the Government plan to encourage more people onto public transport?

The Government response:

Public transport sits at the heart of the Government's strategy. Approximately 80% of rail passengers travel on regulated or discounted tickets, and the Government is investing around £15 billion in our railways over the period 2009-14. Local public transport is the responsibility of local authorities, although the Government invests

over £2.1 billion per year in local transport in England outside London. It has introduced legislation to improve the physical accessibility of buses and has recently launched a consultation on a range of measures to improve bus services for passengers.

What the public said:

Why are there no carbon offsets for preferring public over private transport?

The Government response:

Carbon offsetting compensates for your unavoidable emissions by paying someone to make an equivalent carbon dioxide saving elsewhere in the world. At present there is no official government carbon offset scheme for transport, although the Government does invest in a range of carbon offsetting projects to offset the emissions from official government air travel. The policies set out in the UK Low Carbon Transport Strategy combined with the need to reduce emissions in line with the UK carbon budgets will drive public and private transport towards lower carbon solutions.

What the public said:

Railways in the UK are the most expensive in Europe. However, encouraging more freight on the railways would reduce the costs of diesel fuel and road maintenance and the cost to the environment. Does the Government have any plans to do this?

The Government response:

The Government continues to make investment to support the development of rail freight. It will provide £200 million for the Strategic Rail Freight Network between 2009 and 2014, and £150 million for capacity enhancements. In addition the Government has published *Strategic Rail Freight Network: The Longer-Term Vision*, which sets out how the development of the Strategic Freight Network and enhancement of freight operations will enable the UK's mixed-traffic network to accommodate rail freight growth up to 2030.

What the public said:

What is the Government doing about the high speed rail network?

The Government response:

The Transport Secretary recently announced proposals to deliver an initial core high speed rail network linking London to Birmingham, Manchester, the East Midlands, Sheffield and Leeds. This will bring the West Midlands within about half an hour of London, and journey times of around 75 minutes or less from Leeds, Sheffield and Manchester to the capital. Connections onto existing tracks would be included, allowing direct high speed train services to be operated to cities including Glasgow, Edinburgh, Newcastle and Liverpool as soon as the line opens.

What the public said:

Will the Government commit to improving Transpennine and Scottish links?

The Government response:

The Government has made considerable investment in improving rail links across the Pennines and to major Scottish cities. In December 2006 First Transpennine Express, as part of a £250 million package of improvements, introduced 51 newly built three carriage trains, and two new purpose built maintenance depots at Manchester and York. A number of these trains operate a frequent service between Manchester and York and onwards to Scarborough, Middlesbrough and to Newcastle. In May 2011 the East Coast Main Line will introduce improved journey times and additional services between the North East and Edinburgh. In autumn 2011 the Government will specify further improvements to the InterCity East Coast services, stations and on-board facilities, when it re-franchises the service.

What the public said:

Road, rail and other communications routes are important to the region's economic wellbeing. However, the routes into the North East are poor and suffer many problems. Investment is needed, but so is public funding and infrastructure. What are the Government's plans to support this?

The Government response:

Investment in infrastructure is important, and the Government has increased investment in the region's transport by 31% over the last five years – to more than £600 million in 2008/09. The Government has agreed a

regional Transport Investment Programme through to 2018/19, covering rail, bus and road, including major upgrades to the A19. In addition, the Government recently announced a £580 million investment to support and modernise the Tyne and Wear Metro over the next 11 years. Work is also well under way in North Yorkshire to turn the A1 between Dishforth and Barton into motorway, completing a continuous motorway link between Tyneside and the M25.

What the public said:

Does the Government plan to tackle the inequality in concessionary travel for those over 60s who have a disability and rely on 'Dial a Ride' type services, where a charge is levied?

The Government response:

Concessionary Travel is popular, successful and recognises the importance of public transport for older people and the role access to transport has to play in tackling social exclusion and maintaining well-being. The statutory concession applies to off-peak scheduled local bus services. Demand responsive services such as Dial-a-Ride and other flexible transport services are not included, and the Government has no proposals to include them. Local authorities retain the flexibility to include those services in their concessionary travel schemes, funded locally, based on their assessment of local needs and circumstances.

What the public said:

Over 60 concessionary passes may be leading to some relatively well used routes being cut where the majority of passengers are over 60 as the route makes less profit. Does the Government plan to safeguard these routes?

The Government response:

Since deregulation in 1985, the majority of bus services are provided on a commercial basis so decisions on services run for the commercial judgement of the operator. There is no reason why operators should cut services because of concessionary travel. The main principle of concessionary fare reimbursement to operators is that they should be financially no better or no worse off, as a result of taking in the scheme. Reimbursement takes account of both the loss of revenue from passengers now travelling free and any additional costs such as wear and tear and fuel.

What the public said:

How can we reduce our reliance on cars and encourage people to walk and cycle due to the increased health benefits that they bring?

The Government response:

The Government strongly supports people travelling by active modes when they are able to do so. There are clear health benefits for individuals and the community in terms of reduced congestion and environmental impact. The Government's *Active Travel Strategy* sets out the plans for active travel in

the future. To help people make informed choices about how they travel, the Government is providing them with improved information about opportunities for active travel and the impacts of their transport decisions. The Government has funded a number of projects that encourage people to consider alternatives to the car and to travel more actively.

What the public said:

Many rural areas in Northumberland have poor access to services, including transport in particular. How does the Government plan to address these issues?

The Government response:

The Government acknowledges the importance of enabling access to transport in rural areas. It provides financial support and for rural bus and rail services, including the Northern Rail Newcastle to Carlisle and East Coast Main Line services in Northumberland. The Government is also supporting a Rural Transport and Connectivity Study in the North East to assess the role of transport in providing social, environmental and economic solutions to widen opportunity in rural communities. The study will identify and prioritise challenges, as well as set out ways to address them. For 2009/10, Northumberland County Council received £1.5 million specifically for public transport improvements.

WORK AND PENSIONS

What the public said:

What is the Government doing to ensure that disabled people are not discriminated against in the workforce?

The Government response:

Tackling discrimination is a major priority for the Government and it has introduced legislation to protect disabled people and promote equality. The Disability Discrimination Act has been a cornerstone of this protection and the Equalities Bill will strengthen this. Legislation is important but legislation alone does not reverse trends. This is why we set out the aim to make Disability Equality a reality by 2025. We have worked closely with employers to tackle discrimination in the workplace and promote equal opportunities and diversity. Our Local Employment Partnerships are one example of this.

What the public said:

What services does the Government offer to support disabled people in finding work, specifically from Jobcentre Plus?

The Government response:

Over the past 12 years the Government has strengthened the support and assistance available to help those who are disabled or have a health condition to get back into work. Jobcentre Plus has a crucial role in delivering the programmes and support which we provide. For people with complex needs who wish to move back into employment a range of specialist pan-disability programmes is provided. The Government announced plans to double the budget for the successful Access to Work programme from £69 million to £138 million by 2013/14 and we will be introducing a new programme called Work Choice from October 2010.

What the public said:

What can the government do to ensure that small delivery bodies are able to bid for the current Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) re-contracting of the residential training programme?

The Government response:

DWP are aware that smaller and third sector organisations play a valuable role in welfare provision and are well placed to offer services because of their local experience and knowledge of the community needs. DWP expect prime contractors to join up with local partners and sub contractors to deliver wide ranging help to meet all our customer needs. They will be expected to work proactively with smaller, specialist providers, many of whom will be third sector or

voluntary organisations dealing with disadvantaged groups in the local area.

What the public said:

Does the Government have plans to streamline the pension and benefits system for elderly people?

The Government response:

The Government has already simplified the process to make it easier for pensioners to claim the support to which they are entitled. Since November 2008 claims for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit can be made alongside Pension Credit in a single phone call without the need for a signed claim form. In addition, the Government is planning to run a pilot in 2010 to investigate the viability of making better use of the data held by the Department of Work and Pensions to further improve Pension Credit take-up.

What the public said:

What support does the Government plan to give to those elderly people who are asset rich but income poor?

The Government response:

Pension Credit is a means tested benefit which ensures that no pensioner needs to live on less than £130 a week. Additional support is available through housing benefit and council tax benefit. Pensioners also benefit from a range of additional support irrespective of their income or capital. This includes Winter Fuel Payments, free TV licences for the over 75s, Free NHS

prescriptions and eye tests, free off peak bus travel in England and free swimming. There are similar schemes in the devolved regions.

What the public said:

How does the Government plan to deal with the issue of an aging population, safeguarding the entitlement of the elderly to an affordable and independent life?

The Government response:

The Government set out its strategy for addressing the challenges of an ageing society in Building a Society for All Ages (www.hmg.gov.uk/buildingasocietyforallages) . The strategy builds on a foundation of recent reforms to the pensions and health systems, and programmes such as the Handypersons scheme which helps older people remain independent by helping with small repairs. It identifies a number of key actions that will make a real difference to people in later life. These include bringing forward the review of the default retirement age to 2010, and helping people to effectively prepare for later life with the Active at 60 package.

What the public said:

Does the Government plan to reform the benefit system so that unemployed people who take up voluntary work can still claim Jobseeker's allowance?

The Government response:

The Government believes that volunteering alongside the search for paid employment

can help jobseekers to develop useful skills for work, and can keep them in touch with the labour market. This is why people claiming Jobseekers Allowance are allowed to do unlimited voluntary work, provided they continue to fulfill benefit entitlement conditions, including being available for and actively seeking paid employment. As part of the Six Month Offer, the Government provides access to work-focused volunteering opportunities for people who have been claiming Jobseekers Allowance for six months.

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