

Community contracts give residents the right to demand more from their councils

By Susan Downer

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People who promise to become active citizens could be rewarded with improved council services under a government initiative launched this week.

In an extension of the government's 'something for something' culture, people will be invited to tell their local authorities what they want to see changed in their areas – and what they are prepared to give in return. The agreement will form voluntary local charters, also called community contracts.

Charters will be tested in 12 areas of England: Sunderland, Gateshead, Barnsley, Oldham, Lewisham, King's Lynn, Blyth, Kirklees, Brighton, Manton, Kidderminster and London's South Bank.

Residents will be able to 'set minimum standards, bargain with councils for extra resources and put in place checks on quality', ministers said.

In return, local people will be asked to play their part: 'In return for council pledges on improving parks, clearing graffiti and tackling drug dealers, they will also be able to negotiate commitments by local people who could agree to report incidents of antisocial behaviour, maintain grass verges or even take over the running and management of some council services.'

Where councils do not deliver, ministers are considering giving people the right to demand an investigation or a commitment to guaranteed action. In cases of persistent failure to address an issue, the authority could become liable for compensation or be made to find funding to correct the problem.

Councils will be expected to resource local charters from existing budgets, including diverting neighbourhood management funds or community development resources. Money from community chests and local area agreements could also be deployed.

Councillors will be on the frontline – reaching out to new and under represented communities, brokering relationships with community leaders, helping develop charters and negotiating any conflict if the charter does not meet expectations. Ultimately, they will be able to use their 'call for action' powers to hold an authority to account.

Phil Morgan, chief executive of the Tenant Participation Advisory Service, welcomed the proposals as a way of anchoring councils' duty to involve local people, and said TPAS would work with the government to ensure it learned the lessons from experience of tenant participation compacts established in 1999.

He added: 'It is frustrating to hear the government talk about setting up pilots when we have been running this in the housing sector in a slightly different format for an extremely long time. It would have been good to learn from the tenant participation compacts rather than reinventing the wheel.'

How to develop a local charter, www.communities.gov.uk

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