Minister of Local Government and Community Development, Hon. Desmond McKenzie, has given the assurance that Local Authorities will be strengthened, and not shut down, as has been suggested by some public commentators recently.

In contributing to the Sectoral Debate 2016/2017, the Minister said while this is the case, the Ministry will be taking strong measures to restore discipline to the administration of affairs by the Local Authorities, following the revelations in the Special Reports of the Contractor-General, which were tabled in Parliament.

“The public is aware of the actions I have taken in relation to the Hanover Parish Council. *They are a clear signal…that this Administration, and this Minister, will not stand aside and allow breaches of the public trust to occur, under the banner of “autonomy”.* The Local Authorities are accountable to the Minister under law, and I intend to lift the standard of accountability and of service that they are to provide.”

The Minister announced that all Local Authorities will be audited, to ensure that appropriate systems are implemented to make them significantly more efficient and accountable. He also stated that a number of mechanisms will be introduced to ensure and preserve better management at the local level.

“We have established a Land Divestment Committee, which is responsible for ensuring that the sale or leasing of lands held by the Local Authorities, is conducted in full compliance with existing policies, laws and regulations. We will in short order, be establishing Audit Committees in the Local Authorities, and we will also begin the process of developing Standard Operating Procedures to ensure seamlessness and accountability in the management of their public responsibilities. At the same time, we will be improving institutional capacity in the Local Authorities, by introducing training in Risk-based Auditing. The curriculum has already been developed and beginning this August, the Auditors in the Local Authorities will experience training on a regional basis. This will also facilitate the more robust system of Quarterly Reporting that will be required of the Local Authorities as of this August.”

The portfolio Minister made it clear that failure to adhere to existing laws, policies and guidelines will have practical penalties for the Local Authorities. “We …are tying the payment of monies to the Local Authorities, to their strict compliance. In other words, if the laws or rules are broken, a Local Authority will not receive funding.”

In stating that there are serious challenges to be overcome in the Local Authorities, Mr. McKenzie revealed that he will be inviting representatives of the political and administrative functionaries to discuss and resolve the issues. “I am publicly inviting the General Secretary of the Jamaica Association of Local Government Officers (JALGO), Mrs. Helene Davis-Whyte, and the President of the Association of Local Government Authorities of Jamaica (ALGAJ) Councillor Scean Barnswell, to meet with the Ministry’s team and myself to discuss the issues, and to resolve them in a spirit of partnership. I will also be seeking audience with the Contractor-General in this regard. Local Government needs good systems, and good people giving good service throughout those systems, to satisfy public needs and raise its public image.”