

City Regions Board – report from Sir Richard Leese (Chair)

Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill

1. Members of the City Regions Board in partnership with the People and Places Board have continued to lead the LGA's lobbying on the Cities and Local Government Bill (the Bill) as it continues through Parliament to ensure that the Bill facilitates the most flexible, locally-led negotiations. Royal Assent was expected in December, but will now be early 2016.
2. Recently, the Government tabled a number of amendments regarding "consents" to Combined Authorities. Government also tabled a new amendment giving the Secretary of State the power to take back health functions, after they have been devolved, without local consent. These Government amendments have triggered a great deal of concern in the sector and the LGA has been briefing MPs¹ based on steer from both Boards. Officers have also produced a briefing on the implications of the new amendments to the Bill for member authorities.²

Devolution: constitutional considerations

3. The All Party Parliamentary Group on Reform, Decentralisation and Devolution in the UK has convened a groups of experts to consider the wider constitutional and long-term issues resulting from devolution in all four nations. This inquiry is being led by the LGA President, Lord Kerslake, who attended the City Regions Board in December to update Members and listen to their views. Members will be seeking to initiate a debate on any English issues arising from the report following its publication in March 2016. The LGA is providing the secretariat for the Group.

Devolution: governance arrangements

4. The City Regions Board will be focussing on models of executive governance and will be producing a descriptive piece of work on this topic.

Devolution: the LGA Support offer

5. Take up of the LGA's devolution support offer, drawn up with direction from the City Regions and People and Places Boards, has been very good, and officers have received positive feedback from councils on the range of services that have been used. Andrew Campbell, Associate Director, has met with groups of councils in every part of the country and his connections have been particularly valuable in helping local areas gain insight into the thinking of Whitehall departments as they prepare for their challenge sessions with Ministers.
6. The [DevoNext hub](#) continues to receive positive feedback from the sector and officers have added a number of new features in the past few weeks, including:
 - 6.1. A short video to explain what combined authorities are.
 - 6.2. Links to the September proposals and summaries of the devolution deals that have been announced.
 - 6.3. Links to useful resources developed by local authorities.
 - 6.4. Links to research and analysis to bolster the evidence base for bids.
 - 6.5. Infographics illustrating the benefits of devolution for businesses and what could be gained by devolving skills and employment support.

¹ http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/briefings-and-responses/-/journal_content/56/10180/7318899/ARTICLE

² http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/briefings-and-responses/-/journal_content/56/10180/7611125/ARTICLE#sthash.SsgilYOO.dpuf

7. The LGA has also organised several well-attended events on devolution including:
 - 7.1. A national conference on communicating about devolution in Birmingham on 21 October.
 - 7.2. A joint national conference with SOLACE on governance in a new world on 27 November.
 - 7.3. Two events for elected members to explore place-based leadership in the context of devolution as part of the LGA's Leading Edge and Leaders' Programme.
 - 7.4. The first meeting of a new network the LGA has established to support council officers working on devolution.
8. As most places move to an implementation phase, officers will receive steer from members on how best to focus current resources on implementation and sharing emerging practice.

City Regions meeting with Greg Clark

9. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government wished to discuss implications of the Spending Review and met with Members in December. Members made detailed representation of the following issues:
 - 9.1. Distribution and equalisation measures.
 - 9.2. The nature, form and timescale for the Better Care Fund and its interconnection with the New Homes Bonus.
 - 9.3. Future Business Rates retention and management of risks including impact of appeals and use of reserves and assets.
 - 9.4. Implications of council tax announcements and the Government's position.

The evidence base for devolving employment, skills and welfare

10. The City Regions and People and Places Boards commissioned the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion (Inclusion) to develop a devolved employment model for the most disadvantaged jobseekers, including Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) work-ready claimants, which could be flexible enough to apply in all areas across England. The proposal was submitted to Ministers at the beginning of November by the relevant Board leads (Cllr Sir Richard Leese CBE, Cllr Hawthorne MBE and Cllr Izzi Seccombe), with the aim of influencing Spending Review decisions.
11. The Spending Review announced a new specialist Work and Health Programme (WHP), to replace Work Programme and Work Choice contracts in 2017, for claimants with health conditions or disabilities and those unemployed for over two years. This announcement reflects many principles set out in the LGA proposal (but officers understand it will be a much smaller programme with low levels of funding). Given that so many decisions are yet to be taken, the LGA is at the forefront of discussions with DWP to influence these. In response to a letter from the Employment Minister, Priti Patel, officers are seeking a ministerial meeting for Sir Richard Leese and Cllr Hawthorne to take forward LGA ideas. A roundtable session with councils and the Department for Work and Pensions will take place at the end of January.

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