

Economy & Transport Programme Board – report from Cllr Peter Box CBE (Chair)

We have had a successful and busy month lobbying on transport issues although the changing economic development landscape has also presented councils with a number of challenges.

£100m additional funding for local authority highways maintenance

1. I wrote in January and again on 15th February to the Secretary of State for Transport, Phillip Hammond MP, to request immediate financial assistance to councils to allow us to deal with the significant additional costs caused by the damage to local roads by the cold weather experienced across the country in December. I have also given a number of media interviews on the subject this year. On 22nd February, Phillip Hammond confirmed that councils would receive an additional £100m to repair potholes caused by the bad weather.

Transport Select Committee - impact of winter weather

2. Cllr David Parsons gave evidence to the House of Commons Transport Select Committee Inquiry on the impact of the winter weather on transport on 15th February. Our evidence acknowledged that lessons had been learned from previous harsh winters and gave examples of how councils had improved their preparations in advance of this winter, by working closely with communities and local businesses, providing extra grit bins, improving communications and increasing salt stocks. Cllr Parsons also made the case for additional funding to be provided to Local Highways Authorities to deal with the costs of the damage caused by this winter.

Concessionary fares

3. The Government has listened to the Group's lobbying about the impact of the transfer of funding for concessionary travel on Districts, and put additional money in the provisional 2012-13 settlement, by confirming that it will make available an extra £10 million for a top-up fund for those Districts who are set to be the most significantly adversely affected. This will be a great help to those Districts. However, this doesn't solve everyone's problems. Many of the county and unitary councils that now have responsibility will be left out of pocket. We are working with councils to collect further evidence on this to inform our continued lobbying for fundamental reform through the single pot.
4. I also addressed the National Pensioners Convention Transport Conference on 8 February on the subject of concessionary fares. I outlined the long-standing problems with the scheme and the LGA's proposal to localise bus subsidy.

Skills and local enterprise partnerships

5. The LGA, working with the Association of Colleges, is holding three events in London, Durham and Warrington to explore how colleges and local enterprise partnerships can work together to ensure a closer fit between local skills needs and skills and training provision. Cllr Johnstone, Cllr Cooper and myself are each speaking at one event of the events.

The Social Fund

6. The LGA Chairman and Cllr Richard Kemp met Steve Webb MP, Minister for Pensions, and Andrew Stunnell MP, CLG Parliamentary Under-Secretary, to discuss the localisation of community care grants and crisis loans. They set out Members' concerns about the financial risk and practical challenge of providing emergency financial assistance. Ministers explained that the localisation would be fully funded, without a duty, and places will be able to determine their own provision. Government expectations would be set out in a Secretary of State letter. It was agreed that the customer experience should be uppermost in considering the reform and DWP agreed to share their customer data.

Welfare Reform

7. The LGA Chairman is meeting the Secretary of State on 1 March to discuss the implications for local government that arise from the introduction of universal credit. In advance of the meeting, the Chairman has sent an outline paper making the case for local governance of universal credit face-to-face delivery. The other issues they will discuss include the DWP concerns about the localisation of council tax benefit, the localisation of aspects of the Social Fund, the treatment of housing cost within universal credit and the possibility of pooling funding from the European Social Fund in community budget areas.

Post Offices

8. Cllr Richard Kemp met Post Office Limited to discuss greater local government involvement in the future decisions about the post office network and how Post Office Limited could play a bigger role in service transformation in local government. Post Office Limited agreed to consider expanding their pilot with Sheffield City Council which is exploring a new way of working between Post Office Limited, sub-postmasters, the local community and local councils.

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