

European and International Programme Board – report by Cllr Dave Wilcox (Chair)

1. It is worth repeating that half of the regulation that affects councils today originates in Brussels. When we look at councils' procurement and commissioning arrangements, much of the associated red tape originates in Brussels too. However, we also have to recognise that our insistence on funding having appropriate audit trails also adds to the so-called bureaucracy.
2. Whenever I or other Board members consult councils on the LGA's EU lobbying programme, the need to do something about procurement rules is always high on the list. I'm pleased to say that there is now a clear way forward. After much pressure from the LGA and our sister associations across Europe, the EU has announced a root-and -branch review of procurement. So after years of complaining about the mess, we need to set out what we really want. Local labour clauses? Support to local firms? The cheapest option? Having asked for a review, we are getting one likely to be completed sooner rather than later. So your views on its content need to be collected quickly. The Committee of the Regions will discuss its position on a new Procurement Directive in early April, with a formal position to be agreed in the middle of May.
3. We are all making difficult budget decisions at the moment. Our lobbying in Brussels requires us to build alliances with sister LGAs across the EU. We do this through the European LGA, CEMR. This year, we simply cannot afford the membership fee, but the EU legislative programme continues to threaten new financial burdens as well as offer opportunities. We need our Brussels lobbying alliances to protect UK councils and stimulate development where that's possible. However, we have to negotiate a substantially reduced membership fee in 2011. Having prepared the ground for a subscription reduction at the end of last year, I am grateful to Cllr Gordon Keymer who had to front these negotiations in Brussels and put the case for a British rebate to fellow LGA leaders from across the EU.
4. Clearly, in this time of financial constraint, we have to use any international alliances for more than just lobbying. There is real learning out there on efficiencies and better ways of running public services which could help us transform the front-line. One of my passions is the health agenda. The proposed transfer of public health responsibilities to councils could be a real victory for local government in England. But across Europe, this has been a long-standing function of local government and we have much to learn. Based on an initiative with the Danish LGA, I have been asked to participate in a small group in Brussels to examine innovation and best practice in this field. I am determined to make this work and to ensure that as we set up our new services we can learn from best practice in Europe. I'll come back to this in a future report so you know more about our work.

5. This learning agenda has been recognised by our own Foreign and Commonwealth Office, reflecting the demand for the support of UK local government practitioners from an increasing number of developing nations. FCO invited our Vice Chair, Richard Kemp to respond to demands from local government in Latin America for UK expertise. On a visit paid for and organised by FCO, Richard met with representatives of the seven largest Mexican states, eight city Mayors and the Mexican Ministries of Home Affairs and Environment to ensure that local councils in Mexico will be able to look at UK best practice on a range of environmental and sustainable development issues over the coming months.
6. Following a Committee of the Regions meeting in Hannover where Chancellor Merkel focussed on the still unrealised economic potential of ET I was able to visit Osnabruk, which is twinned with Derby City. Together with Wigan, they are one of the two English authorities to have appointed envoys to their twin towns. I explored with them the strengths and weaknesses of this engagement in cultural terms as well as looking at the potential that twinning might contribute to improvement in local performance and governance.
7. On the day of my journey to Osnabruk, the German Foreign Secretary Baron Dr.Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg resigned, having allegedly plagiarised approximately 50% of his doctoral thesis. As a lifelong learner I thought that in these circumstances I should at least acknowledge my debt to LGA Officers for drafting this report, although in parts it clearly bears my grubby fingerprint. I also acknowledge that they also wrote most of my earlier reports to the Councillors' forum. Some may be disappointed to learn that as a consequence of this revelation I have no intention of following the precedent set by the noble German Baron and do not consider it necessary to reconsider my position.
8. Finally, I would like to say how well we work with and are served by the LGA's honorary Vice Presidents in the European Parliament. They have been working hard to raise local government issues in a range of debates - especially on the big environmental issues such as the recycling of electrical goods. Remember fridge mountains? That's why we need to act. One of our VPs, Julie Girling (Conservative MEP, SW) has an article in the next First which I hope you will all read.

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