

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

I am pleased to report news and activities from the E+I board.

1. Later this year, the UK takes over the Chairmanship of the Council of Europe, one of the oldest organisations dedicated to promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law throughout Europe. The LGA's interest here is that the CoE (through its local and regional Congress, to which we appoint a UK delegation) is the guardian of the Charter of Local Self-Government, by which it sets standards for local/central relations and monitors their application in individual European countries.
2. We have a real interest in three issues which come together in 2011-12: our ministers will be chiring the Council of Europe; one of our own councillors – Cllr Keith Whitmore from Manchester - chairs its Congress; and the UK's own record on local self-government will come under scrutiny. We know that no government relishes public censure from abroad! I think we have a unique opportunity here to start a debate and Cllr Sandra Barnes (E+I programme board vice-chair and Leader of the UK delegation to Congress) will be taking a paper to our next Board on 24 May to discuss how we maximise the potential of this unique year at the Council of Europe.
3. Incidentally, Sandra has completed some powerful work on domestic violence at Congress. Her recommendation called for a legislative framework and global policies, awareness-raising, and specialised support services for victims. The CoE listened and has just established the very sort of binding Convention that Sandra had in mind. Indeed, she has been part of the drafting committee, so the LGA has had real input.
4. Local councils' responsibilities in public health are recognised in Europe, and we can learn from the experiences of other countries. In April I was elected chair of the new Interregional Group on Health at the EU Committee of the Regions (CoR). This will address: e-health; healthy living and ageing through innovative partnerships between local councils and healthcare providers; new skills and jobs within the health sector; public health implications of demographic change; combating health inequalities; gender and health.
5. As we all know, spending pressures are encouraging councils to work more innovatively to find efficiencies. Since councils' ability to share services and buy goods and services are guided by sometimes inconsistent and confusing EU procurement rules, I am keen for us to push for simplification in the upcoming review of EU law in this area. But influencing these EU rules means we need to start lobbying now to anticipate EU proposals expected in early 2012. The EU is already consulting on its reform plans, and together Cllr David Parsons and I have recently secured amendments to an EU-wide local government response.

Local councils are calling for: certain services such as health and social services to remain excluded from the EU rules; simpler procedures when awarding contracts; and higher financial thresholds before the EU rules become applicable. This is just the start of political negotiations to create a more streamlined EU procurement regime.

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