

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

Introduction

1. In this month's report, I want to concentrate on two issues: the Board's plans for the next year and our July meeting which was hosted by Cornwall Council. Both these issues give you a flavour of how we are supporting the local role in driving economic growth and taking the debate outside London so that we can support member councils directly.

The Board's future plans

2. My view is that councils have a long and honourable tradition of driving economic growth at times of recession. Whilst the institutional landscape has changed recently with the emergence of LEPs and the abolition of RDAs, councils remain one of the key drivers of growth. Whilst our continued work on economic growth is vital, there is a need for a wide debate in the sector which demonstrates our ambition for economic growth and sets some new boundaries in our thinking.
3. The Board is keen to lead this debate. We are organising a series of town-hall meetings across the country between now and June 2012 at which we want to debate the ambition of councils to help lead national economic recovery. We are inviting councillors, think tanks and the third sector to contribute papers to the debate. What we hope to achieve is a confirmation of the sector's leading role in driving growth and creating a space where new ideas for economic recovery can be seeded. We will deliver a report to next year's conference which sets out new ideas and places the sector centre-stage in this debate.
4. Importantly, we intend to take this debate around the country. There is a localist element to national recovery as there are different challenges in urban and rural area and across the difference parts of England. That is why we must engage at the front-line with our member councils.

Cornwall

5. Working with the membership was something that began in July when Cornwall hosted our Board meeting. This was our first meeting outside London and it was a great success. More importantly, there was much learning for the Board and the wider Group about how we engage with our member authorities and provide a good service for the LG Group membership fee.
6. The Board meeting was held in County Hall and it was a meeting that we handed over to members and officers in Cornwall to set out their economic and transport priorities and to explain how a more "*localist*" approach from Whitehall could help them deliver more effectively. I also wanted to test that the Board's own work programme and lobbying agenda was one that resonated with the front-line in a member council.

7. We heard about the unitary council's improvement journey and very important work that had been undertaken in the last two years to improve key services and balance the budget. From the Board's own policy perspective, there was a big ambition for more devolution so that the council and the LEP could help drive economic growth and ensure that the transport infrastructure was improved. On the latter, the council had detailed plans for the devolution of national rail and road decision making so that more effective choices could be made locally.
8. Given the extent of the local ambition on economic development and transport, my challenge to the council was to define the areas where Cornwall could get the most from their membership of the LG Group and my challenge to the Board was to establish how we could make the best membership offer to Cornwall. We came up with the following action points:
 - 8.1 Rail and road policy – The LG Group will be exploring whether the Department of Transport would be interested in developing a discussion or pilot with Cornwall to establish new boundaries for localism.
 - 8.2 EU funds – Maintaining Cornwall's access to EU funds after the Brussels budget review in 2013 was a key objective of the council. Cornwall officers are now working with the LG Group to suggest to Government ways in which we can maximise the receipt of EU funds to the UK.
 - 8.3 Renewable energy subsidies - There are different levels of subsidy across the UK to the renewable energy industry. This is proving a barrier to developing this growth sector in the south-west. Cornwall is now working with LG Group officers to research this barrier to economic growth and to press the case with Government.
 - 8.4 Disseminating Cornwall's innovative practice: We are helping the council to use the LG Group knowledge hub, especially the Communities of Practice to disseminate the details of their innovative work.
9. Looking back at the meeting in Cornwall, it is important to reflect on whether it was an effective meeting for both the LG Group and Cornwall.
 - 9.1 From the Board perspective, I think that there were three real benefits from the work in Cornwall. Firstly, we learned a lot about local innovation – especially in the field of Superfast broadband and future regional competitiveness. Secondly, we were able to test whether our London-based lobbying was relevant to a council many miles from Whitehall. Our lobbying for localism was endorsed. Finally, we were able to provide customised support to a member council.
 - 9.2 From the council's perspective, I can only rely on feedback from senior officers in Cornwall who have told us that the follow-up work after the visit has been extremely good.

Contact officer: Virginia Ponton **Position:** Programme Support Officer
Phone no: 0207 664 3068 **Email:** Virginia.ponton@local.gov.uk