

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

1. Will 2012 be another year that is dominated by the economy? I cannot imagine that any other issue will be top of the agenda over the next six months. Thus the Board's Local Growth Campaign will continue into 2012, with our Green Paper on Growth being delivered in July.

Local Growth Campaign

2. In December, we held two town hall debates on councils' role in stimulating growth. I chaired our debate in Leeds, where our host was Metro (the local ITA). Around 35 councillors and officers debated ideas about the role of transport in employment and economic development. The most interesting issue for me was the difference in political will behind the Scottish and Dutch models, compared to our own DfT. The objectives of DfT relate to developing the transport infrastructure, while in the Netherlands and Scotland, there are objectives about the infrastructure being developed as a lever for economic growth. Our starting point in our campaign has been that we have to see transport not as road, rail and buses, but as a tool of economic development and growth. As a result of this debate, I will be raising these issues with the new Secretary of State when I see her in February (more details below).
3. The Board's Vice Chair, Cllr Shona Johnstone, chaired the debate in Birmingham, hosted by West Midlands Councils. The Chair of West Midlands Councils, Cllr Philip Atkins (Leader, Staffordshire County and LGA Board and Executive member) led the seminar of 30 local councillors. Philip set out the unique role that councils and their local partners can play in developing the right environment for business confidence and investment. In the West Midlands, councils have worked together across boundaries and with their partners to help secure a £355 million investment in low-emissions engine plant capacity creating 750 skilled jobs. Strong, local political leadership was key to this deal and is one of the big messages coming out of our debates. The role of local government in creating the right environment for growth is vital to reviving national prosperity.

Transport

4. Later this month, we will be following up the issues from our Leeds debate with the new Secretary of State for Transport, Justine Greening MP. After some discussion with senior civil servants at the Board late last year, we have agreed to run a joint, real-time localism programme with DfT. Whilst we recognise there is a new drive for localism in DfT, for example, through the devolution of schemes like the local major transport scheme funds, DfT tends to devolve on a project by project basis. This means that we are unable to join things up systematically at the local level and thus the full potential of transport as a lever

of growth cannot be realised. After the Board raised these issues with DfT, we have been invited to hold talks with ministers to see how a more advanced localism agenda can be developed.

5. Councils are better prepared than they have ever been for winter weather and have already stockpiled 1.4 million tonnes of grit, more than was used throughout all of last winter and 200,000 tonnes more than this time last year. Councils have also invested in dozens of new gritters, thousands of extra salt bins, more community schemes and better on-line communications to keep residents up to speed with all the latest updates on weather, road closures and gritting routes. We have also established a network for councils so that good practice can be disseminated.
6. It is estimated councils will have to spend £5.5 million upgrading parking machines to accept new thicker 5 and 10p coins. The Board has called on the Treasury, which expects to save about £176 million, to foot the bill. The LGA also wants clarification over similar proposals to introduce a new £1 coin sometime in the near future. I appeared on the breakfast show of BBC Three Counties Radio (Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire) just after Christmas to talk about this issue.

Mary Portas

7. Mary Portas' review of high streets was published in December. Despite pressure from the Board, she did not consult councils well during her review. The press picked this up and her failure to consult councils dominated the press coverage of the launch. I, along with Cllr Shona Johnstone (Vice-Chair) and Cllr Chris White (Chair, LGA Culture, Tourism and Sport Programme Board) covered most of the media that day and showed that, at a local level, there was real cross-party consensus on the vital role that councils play in managing our high street. The Government will respond to her recommendations in early Spring.
8. The Board will be working with partners to ensure that BIS civil servants are better informed about our vital role. While some of the report's recommendations are positive, such as an increased role for businesses and cracking down on the number of new betting shops, we are very concerned that removing regulations around market stalls will result in rogue traders taking advantage of cash strapped families and flooding the market with counterfeit goods.

Post Office

9. The Board has won a major lobbying victory on the role of councils in supporting the future development of post offices. It has been a longstanding objective of the Board for councils and local people to have a bigger say over the local post office network. Ed Davey MP, the Minister for Postal Affairs, and Paula Vennells, Managing Director of Post Office Limited have written to 25 council leaders offering them an opportunity to pilot a new strategic partnership with the post office. All 25 councils have accepted the offer. I will be meeting the Minister and representatives of the Post Office with Lead Members to discuss the objectives for the pilot and how the LGA can help network the participating councils and share their learning.