

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

European legislation in 2012

1. This is my first report of 2012 and another year brings a new legislative programme at the EU. Each year we await and try to influence the proposals which the European Commission will put before the Parliament and member states. Whilst the debate about Europe of the 26 or the 27 goes on, European regulation will continue to account for 50 per cent of all regulation affecting councils.
2. The highlights of this year's legislative programme are the ongoing reform of the EU structural funds, new energy regulation for the public sector and a major review of EU procurement.
 - 2.1. EU Structural fund review: EU regeneration funding (to the value of £8 billion in the UK) is one of the few remaining sources of funding for councils to regenerate their local areas. This is why lobbying to maintain the UK take of the budget and to allow councils to deliver locally is a top priority for the Board. I am very pleased that Cllr Flo Clucas OBE (Liberal Democrat, Liverpool City) has been leading this debate in Brussels on the Committee of Regions on behalf of all EU local councils. She has been advised by LGA officials. Her report on the EU budget calling for councils to be given more control of structural fund spend was agreed in Brussels in late December and has become the official "opinion" of EU local government in the EU budget debate.
 - 2.2. I was pleased that the LGA was able to host the formal UK launch debate on the reform regulations in early December. Both Cllr Peter Box CBE (Chair, LGA Economy and Transport Programme Board) and I spoke with CLG, BIS and EU officials to put a marker down about the need for local management of future funds.
 - 2.3. Energy: The Commission is proposing better energy efficient programmes in all public buildings. Whilst we cannot be against such a good idea, the question of costs and timing is the real concern of the LGA. My colleague, Cllr Gordon Keymer CBE (Con, Tandridge DC) has led this issue in Brussels. Again, he won the argument in the Committee of Regions where he ensured that the formal EU report rejected quantified targets set for the public sector and ensured that new burdens (such as local councils verifying suppliers' energy performances) were rejected.
 - 2.4. Procurement: The LGA has been arguing for a long time that the EU procurement rules need to be amended so that they can allow councils to support local firms. The Commission has heard our call and we are awaiting the formal review report from the Commission which should be published in early January.

Working with other LGAs

3. In order to maximise our lobbying in Brussels, we work with other LGAs through our European association, Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR). Whilst CEMR is an effective lobbying force, it sometimes needs a little push. One push from the LGA was that we asked for a 20 per cent reduction in fees in 2011 and further reductions in future years. I am happy to report that this was agreed by the CEMR Policy committee in Brussels in December – to the relief of the UK delegation (as our request was heard two days after the UK veto at the European summit).
4. We also work effectively with the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) which, over the last three years, successfully secured over £2 million of Department for International Development (DFID) funds for local government in the UK to support councils in developing nations in the Commonwealth. Most commonwealth councillors, like us, understand that practitioner-to-practitioner support is better than costly consultants. This £2 million programme, the Commonwealth Good Practice Scheme, came to an end in late 2011 and CLGF is about to enter discussions with DFID about a possible future scheme. If you have been working with CLGF or would like to get involved in the future and you have any ideas about what a future programme may look like, please let me have your ideas.
5. The Chief Executives of both the European and Commonwealth LGAs will be speaking at our January Board so that we can maximise the value of our membership.

Congress of the Council of Europe

6. We send a delegation of councillors to the Congress of the Council of Europe. This is an important body as it monitors the European Charter of Local Self-Government. 2012 will be an important year as the UK Government takes over the presidency of the Council of Europe, one of our own members Cllr Keith Whitmore (Liberal Democrat, Manchester City) chairs the Congress and there will be a peer review of the UK to look at the standard of our local/central settlement against the Charter. An important year and I will report on key issues in future reports.
7. Our delegation of councillors to Congress is renewed every two years (Strasbourg rules). Again 2012 is an important year as we have to provide new nominations to Congress and the tenure of the 2012 nominees will be four years (a change in Strasbourg rules). The LGA coordinates these nominations on behalf of the Foreign Office and they will be made through the LGA political group offices after the May elections.

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