

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

Local Growth Campaign

1. Our Local Growth Campaign continues. Both the Vice-Chair (Cllr Shona Johnstone) and I have been in town hall meetings across the country to gauge councils' and businesses' views on local investment and to ensure we are lobbying to remove barriers to growth. I had a home meeting in Wakefield on 25 January. Over 45 councillors from across Yorkshire attended. One of our local business leaders, Mark Ridgeway OBE, Chief Executive of Group Rhodes manufacturers, outlined the importance of working in partnership with councils to develop the right environment and infrastructure to promote inward investment and new jobs.
2. Again the issues of skills and transport dominated the debate, especially how we ensure that the ambitious employment aspirations that we find in very young children are sustained into teenage years.

Transport

3. The Board has already been taking forward the councils' concerns about transport. On 1 February, we held a seminar with the transport secretary, Rt Hon Justine Greening MP, and her senior team in the Department for Transport (DfT). The LGA Chairman and I set out the local government agenda. Whilst we welcomed the Government's planned devolution of local major transport funding, there was much more that councils could do to join up the different modes of transport locally and help to attract investors with joined-up local transport offers. The Secretary of State was very receptive to our offers and she has asked for some ideas about local pilots and a real-time localism programme. We will be discussing how we move this forward at the next Board in March.

Development Programme

4. As more economic and transport powers are devolved to councils, it is important that we build the capacity of councils to deliver. Thus the Board has been developing a programme of support for portfolio holders and officers on driving local economic growth. The first member development workshop, held on 9 January, gave councillors space to discuss issues relating to the leadership challenges and opportunities of local growth, sub-regional working and private sector growth. LGA Board member, Cllr Kevin Lynes from Kent, provided a powerful case study of the role that public sector leaders and councils in Kent played in mitigating the impact of Pfizer's decision to withdraw from Sandwich.

Conferences

5. I spoke at two major conferences in January. The Centre for Cities launched its annual Cities Outlook 2012 and I chaired a seminar of councillors, civil servants and think-tanks where I made the case for greater decentralisation to allow better targeting of the micro-economic interventions in the economy, and in particular the case for localising skills.
6. I also provided the key-note speech at a joint LGA/Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion conference, which was chaired by LGA Vice-Chair, Cllr Shona Johnstone. We looked at the role of local government in tackling unemployment. We were joined by both Rt Hon Chris Grayling MP, Employment Minister, and his opposition counterpart Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP. I provided the LGA perspective on the important role councils could play in helping to make the Work Programme succeed.
7. Board Vice-Chair, Cllr Shona Johnstone was part of a panel that debated the future of buses at the recent Public Transport Consortium meeting. This was a timely debate as the DfT finalises its response to the Competition Commission's report on bus competition and considers options for devolving elements of the Bus Service Operators Grant to local authorities. The Economy and Transport Board have lobbied successfully for devolution and this is a step in the right direction. However, the difficult financial situation will continue to impact on bus services and local authorities in partnership with operators and communities will need to continue to innovate to meet need, particularly of the most vulnerable. Cllr Johnstone also spoke at an Inside Government Transport event in London on 24 January. The LGA has long called for greater powers to implement lane rental schemes. There have been several successes in this broad area and the DfT is now consulting on removing the need for Secretary of State approval for permit schemes. This is a significant victory for the LGA.

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