

Item 3i

European & International Board – report from Cllr Dave Wilcox OBE

Pan-Africa peer review training programme

1. I was delighted recently to welcome to the UK a group of African Mayors, CEOs and local government experts who were here as part of the externally-funded peer review project with United Cities & Local Government Africa (UCLGA).
2. They were here to receive training from the LGA on the principles and methodology of peer review before five pilot peer reviews are delivered across Africa later this year. The programme also included input from member and officer peers from across the UK, as well as visits to two local authorities.

Election observation training

3. Members of the Congress of the Council of Europe and the EU Committee of the Regions (CoR) recently participated in a training session on election observation organised by the LGA in London. Several LGA members participated at this event.
4. This is important. The recent history of our continent shows that we must never take democracy for granted. We must remain vigilant, in all countries and at all levels of governance: the fair, transparent and efficient conduct of local elections is a vital element of that. This training session was the third of its kind organised by the LGA (previous ones were in Belfast and Manchester).

EU funds

5. 2012 is the key year in finalising the arrangements for future EU funding. The EU published proposals in October 2011 concerning how the funds for regional development, training, rural development, fisheries and environment could work together in a more integrated way in the next financial period 2014-20.
6. At member and officer level the LGA has increased its activity towards the EU and has collaborated closely with other associations across Europe and this is beginning to show results. In particular: there are welcome new possibilities for local councils to be more closely involved in the design and delivery of the funds; there are much stronger rules on working in partnership with local councils; there is greater opportunity for local strategies to help steer the delivery of the funds; there are new opportunities for the involvement of local community groups. Our CoR members have contributed towards this.

7. We have agreed with civil servants to create a local government secondee position within BIS. This person will form part of the UK negotiating team for the EU structural funds reforms, and will seek to represent the interests of local councils and LEPs in the negotiations and provide a link for councils within BIS.

Cutting EU red tape

8. Many of our councils complain about EU red tape, whether it is the complexity of bidding for EU funding or the burden of applying EU rules. As LGA, and as members of the CoR, we continue to press the EU to keep new laws to a minimum and to apply a light touch, by keeping rules simple, minimise reporting requirements etc. Our colleague Lord Tope represents the CoR on the Group that advises Commission President Barroso on steps that the EU can take.
9. However almost a third of the administrative burdens deriving from EU laws stem from inefficient national implementation. With this in mind, Lord Tope and his colleagues have just published a report "Europe can do better" listing 74 best practice initiatives from across Europe: on e-government, on intelligent solutions in particular for small businesses, direct stakeholder involvement, good guidance and cross-border initiatives. It shows that there is scope for improving implementation of EU law on the home front, as well as in Brussels!

Committee of the Regions

10. UK members again contributed well to the February plenary session of the CoR. The highlight of the session was an open dialogue with the European Commission President Barroso about the role of local government in addressing the challenges of the current economic downturn: he is in no doubt that local responses to the crises are of fundamental importance.
11. Our colleague Cllr Doreen Huddart contributed an insightful report on child poverty in Europe. The financial crisis of the past four years has placed pressure on the provision of social services across EU member states. A major challenge will be to find smarter, more effective ways to help. Finding workable solutions will clearly involve all the statutory and voluntary agencies working together as an exemplar of multi-level governance in action.

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