

Environment and Housing Board – report from Cllr Mike Jones (Chairman)

Growth and Infrastructure Act

1. The Growth and Infrastructure Bill received Royal Assent on 25 April, bringing to an end the LGA's six month parliamentary campaign on the legislation. Our lobbying resulted in a number of changes to the legislation. The criteria for measuring performance on processing major planning applications will be subject to parliamentary scrutiny and approval, before it can be used to judge any local authority. The proposal to allow developers to appeal to the Planning Inspectorate to renegotiate the level of affordable housing with their section 106 agreement, will now expire in April 2016 following the insertion of a 'sunset' provision which the LGA campaigned for alongside the National Housing Federation. We also secured a new clause to strip away the bureaucracy surrounding Local Development Orders, removing the centrally set monitoring requirements and the need to seek the Secretary of State's approval for draft Orders.
2. The clauses within the Act which reform the system for registering town and village greens were agreed without amendment, against formidable opposition, reflecting LGA campaigning. These measures align registration with the planning system, simplifying the process for councils, and preventing the system being abused as a tool to prevent development. We also campaigned for removal of the housing borrowing cap, which is currently imposed on stock owning councils. Finally, the Bill proved itself to be another channel for debating government's plans to increase the size of single storey household extensions under permitted development. The LGA and its members worked with members of both the Commons and Lords to campaign strongly against these proposals. In response to the debate, Government brought forward a new process through which neighbours can raise objections. This now is a matter for secondary legislation and while we have continuing concerns with this new system, members of the House of Lords secured a commitment from Government to discuss the detail of the new system with the LGA before regulations were brought forward.

Housing

3. This month the LGA submitted our response to the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) Housing Commission, and I provided oral evidence to an evidence session on investment. We stressed that councils are supporting growth and are using the planning system to provide certainty to encourage investment. The real barrier to housing growth is access to finance to build and to buy. We know that councils are working in partnership with developers to bring forward sites and unlock those that have stalled. Our statements also reiterated the LGA's opposition to the unnecessary centrally set housing borrowing cap.
4. We have also provided input into the Labour Party's Commission on Infrastructure chaired by Sir John Armitt. Cllr Ed Turner joined attendees from a range of sectors including utility companies and regulators to discuss how Britain can achieve the improvements to infrastructure it needs to remain competitive. New housing development must be sustainable over the long term and infrastructure contributions are an essential part of this. Cllr Turner noted that although in many cases decision-making remains out of local government's control, for any infrastructure scheme governance arrangements which reflect political decision-making at a local level are vital to success.

5. We continue to maintain dialogue with the National Housing Federation (NHF) through meetings with their Chair, Lord Matthew Taylor, and Chief Executive, David Orr. We discussed the potential impact of welfare reforms on local authorities and housing associations and agreed to work closely to share our organisations' evidence on the cumulative impact of the reforms. There will be a board-to-board meeting to consider findings from this research. We also discussed the LGA and NHF's positions ahead of the Spending Review, as well as issues relating to the Green Deal and apprenticeships.

Planning Advisory Service (PAS) Governance Board

6. Cllr Tony Newman and I attended the first meeting of the new PAS Governance Board on 11 April. The Board has been set up to provide sector leadership to the support offered by PAS ensure it is responsive to councils' needs and supports exchange of good practice. The aim is to support on-going improvement in plan making and decision taking including helping councils to avoid designation on performance on major applications. The Board consists of the LGA, DCLG Directors and representatives of SOLACE, ADEPT and the Planning Officers Society.

Waste Update

7. Following our work defending councils' interests during the Judicial Review of Defra on recycling regulations, we have urged Ministers to take account of the principle of local determination explicitly supported by the judgment when drawing up the new MRF Code of Practice and in guidance accompanying the regulations. Our consultation response called for proportionate and appropriate measures which will generate both market confidence in the quality of recyclate and the certainty which councils need. Cllr Clare Whelan reiterated these points when she attended a roundtable with Lord de Mauley and waste management industry, as did I in a recent meeting with the Minister.

Accessing Energy Company Obligation funding for energy efficiency schemes

8. The LGA has been making the case for local authorities that are not registered as Green Deal Providers to place their energy efficiency projects on the ECO brokerage service. In response to DECC's consultation on the ECO brokerage and in our submission to the spending review process, we set out how allowing councils access would contribute to the success of the platform and deliver government objectives by fostering competition, targeting resources to those who need it most and maximising the resource available for projects.
9. In support of this work I met with Angela Knight, Chief Executive of the Energy UK. We discussed the LGA and Energy UK's priorities on energy efficiency, and how both organisations can support councils and energy suppliers to work effectively together. At the meeting we agreed to promote good practice (showcasing a range of examples of effective local partnerships between councils, energy suppliers, and other agencies), explore options to promote action on energy efficiency by Registered Providers, and to organise a joint conference on the theme of local action on energy efficiency in the autumn, in collaboration with the NHF.

Events - Planning for Growth and Private rented and empty homes conferences

10. Cllr Clyde Loakes and Cllr Ed Turner chaired two conferences in April that addressed councils' role in facilitating much-needed housing and growth. Speakers included Shona Dunn, Director of Planning, DCLG and Andrew Stanford, Head of the Private Rented Sector Taskforce, DCLG, as well as experts from local councils around the country. A range of well-attended workshops and panel discussions examined topics such as engaging with landlords, bringing empty homes back in to use, negotiating sustainable growth locally; and how long-term planning can be used to promote growth.

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