

Economy and Transport Board – report from Cllr Peter Box CBE

1. As winter approaches, councils are already well prepared for bad weather. We recently published our winter weather survey which showed that councils are once again in a strong position to keep businesses and the public moving, and that the biggest barrier in being able to deliver more was funding. No doubt you will all be seeing me on the breakfast news as the winter weather hits us and the Board ensures that our messages about the preparedness of councils are heard. The Secretary of State for Transport will be attending our next Board meeting and I will be ensuring that he hears the message about the excellent work of councils to keep our roads safe.

City Deals

2. I am pleased report that, last month, two more Wave 2 City Deals were signed, which means that 3 out of the 20 in negotiation have now been agreed. The Thames Valley Berkshire Deal enables the alignment of national and local investment in youth skills and employment, with objectives that include reducing youth unemployment by 50 per cent within 3 years. The Greater Ipswich Deal also has a strong focus on skills and employment, and involves the piloting of a Youth Job Centre. It is expected that one or two more City Deals will be signed before Christmas, with the rest concluded in the New Year.
3. Despite the success of individual city regions, it is disappointing that there is slow progress overall from Government on the Wave 2 City Deals. I am concerned about the unwillingness of spending departments to explore propositions that involve bolder devolution. This exposes the risks that the Growth Deals that the Government committed to negotiating with all LEP areas will get mired in Whitehall bureaucracy. This would suggest a potential role for the LGA in supporting councils involved in the Growth Deal negotiations to try to leverage their collective bargaining power. We propose to hold an event in the New Year that would enable the sharing of lessons from the Wave 1 and 2 City Deal negotiations and discussion of common issues, with a view to strengthening the hand of local partners as they enter Growth Deal negotiations.

Winter resilience

4. On 11 November, the Board's Deputy Chair, Cllr Mike Haines, gave oral evidence to the Transport Select Committee enquiry on winter resilience. As well as questions on councils' preparedness for the coming winter months, the committee were also interested in how well councils were prepared for and had dealt with the recent St Jude's storm. Cllr Haines was able to provide evidence that preparing for extreme weather events was normal practice for councils. They provided vital services such as information to residents using all forms of media, coordinated actions through Local Resilience Fora, and mobilised staff and resources. Cllr Haines was also able to point to initial results from the LGA winter weather survey.

Highways Agency and Department for Transport

5. During our Town Hall debates, there was one issue that united councils across parties and north and south. That was the difficulty in working with the Highways Agency at a local level and the consequent blockage to growth. We have brought the Highways

Item 3

Agency (HA) directors to the LGA to try to resolve this issue. Joined by three LEP Chairs, the Board Vice and Deputy Chairs Cllr Tony Ball and Cllr Mike Haines and Cllr James Lewis (Leeds City) and Cllr Ian Stewart (Cumbria CC) led a very successful discussion with the HA and Department for Transport with regards to how the HA can work better with councils and LEPs on supporting local growth. The strategic roads network, managed by the HA, has a massive impact on prosperity of local economies and growth prospects and councils have been frustrated by their inability to engage and influence HA activity and investment to support local growth. As a result of this discussion, the HA have agreed to have new strategic level conversations with sub-regions and local leaders to see how the HA can play a much more proactive role on growth. We are currently working with LEPs and the HA to convene the meetings.

Streetworks Task Force

6. We have been working with senior officials in the utilities firms to try and ensure that they manage streetworks more effectively and cut the costs to councils and business. I chaired the third LGA Streetworks Task Force on 4 November, with Board Vice and Deputy Chairs Cllr Tony Ball and Cllr Mike Haines. The Task Force brings together utility companies and local government – represented by Economy and Transport Board lead members. The meeting put the finishing touches to a joint statement of what good streetworks look like and a brief information document on streetworks for business, which will be launched shortly. The Task Force has also set up a research project looking at the drivers to good contractor performance which will report next year.

Parking fines and fees

7. The issue of parking charges has once again made national news with the Transport Committee releasing a report on local authority parking enforcement, Rt. Hon. Eric Pickles MP calling for free parking, and criticism from Which? on the amount of cars councils are towing. The report released by the Transport Committee called for a "five minute grace period" for parking tickets, and argued that councils should defend their position of not using parking fines as a "cash cow" by publishing annual parking charge accounts.
8. My response to this was reported on BBC Online, Mail Online and Radio 4 news bulletins. I was interviewed by BBC News on the subject, saying "As this report recognises, parking controls are not being used by councils to raise revenue. They are essential for keeping motorists and pedestrians safe, traffic flowing and ensure people can park near their homes and local shops."
9. We responded to the Which? claims that councils are "raking it in" by towing away thousands of cars for minor parking offences. Our response was included in the Sunday Times and said: "Councils follow the spirit of guidance as is demonstrated by the fact that only 1% of the total numbers of removals are appealed against successfully."
10. Rt. Hon. Eric Pickles MP also called on councils to offer free parking for up to 30 minutes near local high streets. In response, Vice Chair of the Board, Cllr Tony Ball, told the Telegraph: "Councils are working hard to boost trade and keep areas vibrant through parking incentives. This may work in some areas to ensure a high turnover of shoppers that would cause gridlock and chaos in others."