

Environment Board in 2009-10: Overview

Summary

This paper is being tabled largely as background for Board Members, though feedback at and outside the meeting would be welcomed.

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the paper.

Action

Members and officers to feedback.

Overview of LGA Work

Background

Summary

1. This paper offers an overview of the context and main issues affecting the Board in the 2009-10 Board year.
2. Members' feedback and views would be welcome, at the meeting and outside it.

Wider context

3. The dominant aspect of the political environment is the approaching General Election, whose outcome is more open than any since 1997. Issues featuring strongly in national public debate include the global and domestic economic situation, the need to recover the public finances, and the knock to the reputation of national politicians and politics resulting from the expenses scandal. The approach of the Copenhagen summit and media reporting of climate trends and events is increasing attention on climate change and the environment. The relationship between national, regional, local and community is an important strand in the national debate with a particular bearing on councils, reflected in policy statements and positioning by all the main parties.
4. Within local government, beyond individual service and thematic issues, key areas of concern are: the state of the economy and rising unemployment; extreme pressures on council finances, which are set to become even more challenging; the reputation of local government; and, in areas affected, reorganisation. The LGA's survey data on councils and the public, and discussion at the cross-Board Member event in December 2008 suggests, however, that environment and climate change are also seen as having continuing importance.
5. For the organisations in the LGA Group, in addition to responding to the external and sectoral agenda, 2009-10 needs to see further progress towards realising the ambitions of the *Getting Closer* strategy (crucially closer working together by different parts of the Group and stronger involvement of the membership more widely). The Group also needs to find efficiencies and savings to compensate for static or declining income.

Main issues for Environment Board

Housing and Planning

6. The 2008-09 Board year saw a lot of activity on housing, especially over the summer, with the *Places you Want to Live* campaign bringing about important shifts in government policy on housing finance and new-build, the launch of consultations by CLG and Tenant Services Authority on allocations and social housing regulation, the publication by the Conservatives of a Green Paper, and the withdrawal by Government of funding for ALMOs which have not yet completed Decent Homes. All this makes for an extremely challenging policy agenda for the coming year. Meanwhile, it will be important to keep an eye on the state of the housing market as it impacts on construction activity, the availability of mortgages for individuals, and arrears and repossessions of owner-occupied and buy-to-let property. While so far the rise in repossessions has not been as rapid as some commentators expected, there is still considerable risk that lenders will become less forbearing, whether the economy continues to be subdued, or it improves to a point where repossessed properties can more easily be sold. Board Members will attend the Community Wellbeing Board in November to discuss work officers have set in hand on the important relationship between housing and the care of older people and vulnerable adults.
7. Spatial planning tends to receive less media attention than housing but is the aspect of the Board's agenda over which there is perhaps the most substantial real difference between national parties, with the Conservatives proposing to do away with regional planning and the Infrastructure Planning Commission. The service in councils is under a lot of pressure through the combination of the general squeeze on council finances, cuts in the CLG Housing and Planning Deliver Grant, and lower fee income from developers.
8. Even if the policy environment for councils' housing and planning role develops in a positive direction, the state of the property market and the financial pressures on councils means that the Board will need also to keep focused on how, through IDeA and LACORS, the Group can maintain a good and appropriate level of support for councils' performance and improvement, building on the bringing together of policy and support for councils which has been trialled in 2008-09 on new-build and the private rented sector. In addition to the policy issues mentioned above, the fire safety of council housing is an issue on which we may need to be supporting councils, practically and reputationally.

Environment

9. Like housing and planning, carbon reduction is an issue where Getting Closer is helping us develop a stronger virtuous circle between advocacy of a stronger role for councils and performance support which helps councils deliver and build

23 4

a reputation supporting the case for more devolution. 2008-09 saw highly effective campaigning through *Small Change Big Difference* and a lot of dogged trench warfare through a number of important but technically challenging consultations. This has paid off in a much better recognition by DECC and CLG of the importance of thinking about places and councils as agents for making things happen – both on carbon reduction generally and the big specific prize of energy efficiency in the housing stock. Meanwhile colleagues across the Group have worked with partners at a national level to move the Nottingham Declaration apparatus into a new mode of supporting but also challenging councils to improve.

10. In the coming year, the important priorities for policy are: to ensure that government and opposition take on board the approach to domestic energy efficiency in our July *Kyoto to Kettering* document; and to propose an approach to carbon budgeting which will support a place-based approach and fit with the performance framework. Meanwhile we need to make sure that the changes in the Nottingham apparatus bed in and start to make an impact on councils' performance.
11. Summer 2009 saw the publication by Government of new long term projections to guide climate adaptation, reinforcing awareness of the risks posed to communities and councils by a changing climate. We are planning a further *Cutting the Green Tape* publication to help senior decision-makers in councils interpret the projections and work out what action they need to take in response. Nottingham provides the mechanism for support for councils on adaptation too.
12. Officer responsibility for adaptation is being brought together with flood risk management. Defra have a place for legislation in the 2009-10 session, though the scope of the Bill, and indeed whether it gets passed or not, will depend on the timing of the election and what happens to Parliamentary business more generally. Whether through discussion before the Bill is finalised, or Parliamentary activity, we need to win important arguments with Defra about not complicating county and district relationships and responsibilities, and the level of resources councils need to carry out their new responsibilities.
13. Though not in the first rank of national political debate, waste is a very significant challenge for councils. They need to continue to achieve increased diversion from landfill in the face of ever higher landfill tax, the squeeze on public sector revenue and capital budgets, and hostility in parts of the media to necessary changes to collection methods and facilities for treatment and disposal. The Conservatives have recently set out their proposals on waste, and we understand Hilary Benn is planning to take a higher public profile through the autumn. Recent LGA media activity on packaging has brought some public protests by manufacturers and retailers but also private approaches seeking to build a dialogue with us. The main mechanism for

23 4

performance support will continue to be a unit in IESE (the South East RIEP) which supports the RIEPs' work on waste at national level.

Knowledge, networks and communication

14. Across all these issues, we need to strengthen the flow of information and communication between the Group and the sector. Specific actions we have under way include:
- Finding ways of making councils aware of research and new technologies which can help them deliver
 - Bringing together web offerings across the Group. For example, the Group is developing, with the Chartered Institute of Housing, *Local Housing Knowledge* which will be a new single source of information and practice knowledge for council members and officers with responsibility for housing
 - Experimenting with using social networking as a mechanism for sharing knowledge and views
 - Refreshed and reinforced senior officer networks.
15. We are ready to work with Members on new ways of communicating with and engaging the wider Member community interested in the Board's issues, building on innovations in 2008-09 like the housing finance member campaign group.

Resource Implications

16. The importance of the Board's business for councils and in the national policy debate is well understood corporately. Nevertheless, pressures on the Group's finances mean we will need to look even more vigorously at focusing on the most important issues, and, above all through better working across the Group, making better use of the resources we have.

Implications for Wales

17. Some of these issues are not devolved (for example planning for major infrastructure), while on others the Welsh economy and politics are subject to the same drivers. There is particularly keen interest in Wales in reform of housing finance, with a particularly challenging interaction between issues which are devolved and which are not.

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