

Paper for Environment and Housing Board lead members on priorities and forward work programme

Introduction

The new Board cycle provides an opportunity to take a fresh view of the Board's work programme and priorities for the coming year. The Board's remit covers a broad range of issues and it is important that our resources are focused on those that present key risks or opportunities for local government and where we can have significant impact and deliver maximum value to councils. It would be helpful for the Board to develop a clear narrative and set of objectives to give a focus to our forward work programme. This paper is designed to inform an initial discussion by the group leads on the Board of objectives, priorities and ways of working that we could then take to the full Board for discussion at our first meeting in September.

Maximising impact and focusing engagement

Firstly it would be helpful to discuss whether we can agree some of principles that could underpin the way we operate to ensure we maximise impact and value of the Board's work. These could be:

- Defining local government's agenda and proactively leading the debate on the big issues for councils.
- Focusing our work the top policy issues where we can deliver maximum influence and impact.
- Collective ownership of decisions and positions agreed by the Board.
- Maintaining and strengthening good relationships with government departments to engage at senior level and influence at an early stage of policy debates.
- Maximising opportunities to make links to the work of other LGA Boards and panels to join up agendas, add firepower and make links where central government is often unable to.
- Ensuring our work is visible to members and stakeholders by focusing on high profile issues and developing effective media stories.

The Board has a powerful role to play in delivering the priority campaigns that the LGA has identified based on the priorities of member authorities. The LGA is developing a single narrative to bring together the existing campaigns together to make the overall message more powerful, easier to understand and demonstrate that local government can provide the solutions.

The central message of that narrative is:

Local government has delivered huge cuts in public spending and is working hard on new ways to deliver services, but the outlook for public spending tells us that more spending cuts are in the pipeline. We will need radical reform of big services, like social care, but we will also need a return to growth if we are to avoid damaging cuts to vital frontline services in future.

If councils are given more economic powers which currently sit with national Government, more freedom and more flexibility, they can promote local growth so

taxpayers and public services can share the proceeds of growth and avoid damaging cuts to frontline services.

The Board's remit covers issues that are clearly central to this narrative and should inform our focus and priorities for the coming year.

Proposed priorities for the Board

Based on this core LGA message, the principles set out above and the priorities agreed in the LGA business plan, we should seek to get agreement from the Board to a set of priorities which could be as follows:

Growth

Objective: To promote the positive role that councils play in driving economic growth particularly through their roles on planning, housing supply, local infrastructure and green industries and argue for increased flexibilities to allow them to go further.

Planning will continue to be a high profile area of reputational risk for the sector particularly in getting plans in place under the new NPPF and in securing contributions from developers to necessary infrastructure and affordable housing. At the time of writing we are expecting a series of announcements on planning and housing which could have significant implications for councils and for the Board's work programme. Our focus in influencing the debate should be to evidence that councils are using the planning system to plan positively for growth. There are some improvements (such as localising planning fees and simplifying permitted development) that could make the system work more quickly. However the key issue stalling development is developers inability to finance new development as a result of weak demand (from house-buyers because they cannot get mortgages and employers because they are not expanding).

We therefore need solutions that will drive up spending power and reinvigorate demand in markets and that will require an understanding of local market conditions. Increasing house-building is featuring strongly in discussions about kickstarting the economy. Our work should focus on securing more flexibility for councils to invest in housing particularly affordable housing, finance infrastructure and deliver green growth as a means of creating jobs and attracting investment and business. This focus will incorporate the Housing the Nation campaign and include leading the debate on sustainable models for new social and intermediate housing development and understanding the impact of welfare reform on local housing strategies.

There is a short and immediate window of opportunity to influence the Autumn Statement which is expected to focus on growth with an emphasis on infrastructure and development to kick start the economy. In the longer term we should be seeking to influence manifestos in the lead up to the next election.

This will require a joined up programme of work on growth that makes connections to work being led elsewhere in the organisation, in particular, the Economy and Transport Board's local growth campaign and the newly constituted Finance Panel.

Waste

Objective: To champion local innovation in waste management and lobby for greater local decision making on waste as the only means of addressing future funding gaps in waste.

As a statutory and highly visible local service subject to frequent challenge in the media, waste is a high profile issue for councils. As highlighted by the LGA's work on the funding outlook for councils, waste services will be one of the biggest demands on council budgets, second only to the cost of social care.

In reflection of this, the Board could give focus to its work on waste through the work already in the planned work programme on modelling and forecasting future spend on waste services to present a coherent case for change.

The work could identify the significant and uncontrollable cost drivers in waste services – such as the land fill levy; increased demand for services; potential cost if Defra is successfully challenged through Judicial review; packaging targets – and on the other hand, potential income streams and savings that can be made from recyclates and energy from waste. Subject to the findings of this work the Board could develop evidenced lobbying positions on future funding gaps and more local decision making on waste. The work would also result in good practice and innovation to be made widely available to the sector.

Ensuring councils retain powers required to deal effectively with enviro-crime will continue to be an issue as the red-tape challenge progresses.

Carbon reduction and climate resilience

Objective: To champion councils as confident leaders of action on carbon reduction and climate resilience to the benefit of local communities and local economies.

Councils are leading action on climate change and green energy at local level and the Board is well placed to draw on that experience and evidence to lead the debate at national level. The focus of our work should be demonstrating that local action on energy efficiency, resilience and green growth has significant benefits at local and national level and it follows that councils must be given the flexibility they need to act.

Climate Local already provides a platform for local government to champion its leadership in helping communities to live within their environmental means and exploit the benefits for local people by saving money on their energy bills, tackling fuel poverty and generating income from renewable energy, attracting new jobs and investment in 'green' industries, understanding local climate risks and building resilience. The Environment Agency has provided a secondee to support this work over 2012-14. The task now should be to raise the profile and status of this initiative

to help more councils exploit opportunities and use the evidence it provides to influence the national agenda.

We will need to maintain and strengthen relationships with DECC and Defra at a strategic level to ensure national policy reflects the central role councils play in the green energy, carbon reduction and adaptation agendas and to maximise opportunities for councils to lever in resources from national initiatives (such as the Green Deal) to support local initiatives, but our focus should be on leading the agenda and demonstrating clear outcomes delivered through our Climate-Local.

Flooding – managing flood risk and building resilience

Objective: To support councils in developing skills and expertise in their new role as Lead Local Flood Authorities and to make the case for adequate and flexible funding for that role.

Increased volatility in weather patterns affects more communities, homes and peoples lives each year and cuts across many areas of council service delivery -be it gritting roads, filling in pot holes, cleaning up and repair after floods, delivering services in emergency conditions and increased demand on services from those affected (temporary housing for example). This presents significant challenges for councils, not least in dealing with unpredictable cost burdens in a highly constrained financial climate. It also presents a substantial reputational risk to councils under intense scrutiny on their ability to respond and assist.

With flooding predicted to be the biggest climate risk to the UK this century, our focus should be on building a strong evidenced case for adequate funding and government support for councils in their new local flood risk management role and in championing councils' work in increasing resilience to flooding and helping communities recover – including the issue of insurance for flood risk areas. This work is being led by the Inland Flood Risk Working Group and the focus of the board should be to add weight to the recommendations of that group.

Ways of working

It would also be helpful to discuss how we ensure that the Board operates in a way that keeps us focused on top level priorities and ensure collective ownership of our decisions and policy positions. There are a number of issues to consider here including:

- The role of board portfolio holders and sub groups to the Board.
- Identifying tangible outcomes to progress over the coming year
- Focusing meetings on debating and setting policy
- Lead Members meetings to agree agendas for the Board meetings and deal with issues that can be dealt with outside the full board meetings.
- More coherent procedures for prioritising, steering and clearing consultation responses and non-priority issues.
- Regular updates to Board members on key issues and developments in between Board meetings.