

Appendix 2 to Item 6

LGA Executive

Response to Scrutiny Panel Review of LGA Member Structures

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The LGA Executive welcomes the Scrutiny Panel's report on the operation of member structures and member task groups. The Executive asked the scrutiny panel to look into these two specific areas recognising that, after a year of operation, it was timely to reflect on whether the objectives of the revised member structures have been met. As noted in the scrutiny panel's report, the move in 2004 to introduce new member structures around a strategy of 'doing less, but better' was a bold move as it placed a much greater emphasis than in the past on the LGA as a lobbying organisation. At the time it was recognised that the member representation element of our work was also important, and that success would depend on the balance between the two aspects of our work being effectively supported.

1.2 The Executive is pleased that the Scrutiny Panel has found that the new board structure has delivered a number of significant benefits over the previous arrangements with a more focused approach to policy priorities, more informed debate on these priorities, a higher profile for senior LGA members as champions for local government and a greater impact for the LGA in getting its messages across. However, the Executive is concerned to note the Scrutiny Panel's view that shifting the balance of activity in this way has led to the wider membership feeling less engaged in the Association's work.

1.3 It is noted that the Scrutiny Panel suggests that no fundamental revision is required to the basic member structure, but it is accepted that attention needs to be given to those elements of the structure which appear to be working less well and implement new ways of working in other areas to ensure the wider membership can become more engaged with the Association's work. The response to each of the Scrutiny Panel's recommendations sets out the proposed action to ensure this happens without detracting from the accepted approach of 'doing less, but better'.

2. Response to Recommendations

The Board Structure

Recommendation 1

More needs to be done by the Association to convince both board members and the wider membership of authorities of the benefits of “doing less, but better”.

2.1 The principle that the Association needed to focus on ‘doing less, but better’ was one of the clear messages from the 2002 perceptions audit. Members recognised that if the Association was to make an impact, it had to pick its battles carefully and focus attention on lobbying on fewer issues which would have significant implications for local government. The establishment of the LGA Executive and its six boards has been the building block of this new way of working. Boards have supported this approach through the business planning process, identifying a small number of priority interventions on which they focus each year to contribute to the delivery of our strategic objectives. Endorsement from the Scrutiny Panel that this approach is having a greater impact on government and the outside world is therefore, very encouraging.

2.2 The Scrutiny Panel’s comment that whilst there has been overall recognition that this is the right strategy for the Association’s lobbying, it does not yet have the wholehearted support from everyone within the formal structure and from across the wider membership is noted with concern. The Executive recognises that any new structure will take time to bed down and that more work needs to be undertaken to promote and demonstrate the Association’s lobbying successes to its membership to reassure them that the Association is working effectively on their behalf on the major issues of concern for local government. The Executive has already agreed that as part of its stakeholder engagement strategy we should engage in a further series of regional roadshows and make a greater effort to communicate directly with members and member authorities about our work by visiting authorities and attending meetings in the regions. This is in addition to the direct member engagement programmes run by the political group offices, and the planned programme of visits and meetings undertaken by the Association and central body officers. The impact of the Association’s lobbying strategy will be showcased at high profile events such as the LGA annual conference, and through publications such as First. There will also be an opportunity to evaluate the impact of the association’s lobbying strategy and its membership engagement activities through the next perceptions and membership surveys.

Recommendation 2

The LGA Executive should ask itself whether it has adequate arrangements in place for oversight of the LGA’s business plan

2.3 The LGA business plan has been developed by members as a jointly agreed work programme for the Association, recognising that resources have to be targeted at delivering the key projects that will make a significant difference to the outside world. This has been achieved by boards outlining no more than three priority interventions and this being agreed as a single work programme by the Executive. The business plan currently has 24 interventions which focus the work of

each of the boards and the LGA Executive. Progress against each intervention is monitored by each board and the Executive receives quarterly reports which monitor the outcomes. The half year report was considered at the May Executive. It is not considered necessary to report any more frequently than this, although exception reporting on high risk or high profile priority interventions will continue to be considered by the Executive. Further consideration needs to be given to the development of the business plan for 2007 to deliver the people and places strategy which again will require boards to review their current priorities and determine the contribution they make to the delivery of the overall objectives, in light of the 'doing less, but better' approach.

Recommendation 3

The remits of the Environment and Regeneration Boards should be revisited to consider whether they may be too wide, and if so, whether an additional board may be required.

2.4 Establishing the member structures around the six cross cutting boards and the LGA Executive was a deliberate attempt by the member structures task group to emphasise the LGA's primary role as a lobbying organisation. Boards were intended to be strategic and capable of lobbying on key issues across a range of local authority policy areas. It was accepted at that time that the Association shouldn't mirror local authority member structure arrangements around service delivery. It is recognised, however, that the remits of some of the service boards, particularly the environment and regeneration boards are wide and cover important areas of service delivery including planning, housing, transport and waste in addition to environmental protection and culture, tourism and economic regeneration. The LGA Executive is minded to agree the recommendation and will reconsider the current balance of responsibilities of the Environment and Regeneration Boards with a view to creating an additional board in these areas.

Recommendation 4

The lead member approach to Board's remits should be revisited as a means of better engaging the ordinary board member and taking the pressure off office holders.

2.5 This recommendation is noted. It is recognised that boards may wish and may need to operate in different ways. Board Chairs and lead members working with Programme Directors, and the new business managers will be asked to consider and implement suitable approaches for each board, in consultation with members.

Recommendation 5

Consideration should be given to additional support and development for Chairs and office holders, if requested.

2.6 This recommendation is accepted. Following a review of the LGA's support services, new administrative support arrangements have recently been put in place around a 'board support team'. This provides administrative, member and project support for each board and the LGA Executive. It is recognised that the leading members on boards play a significant role in lobbying and influencing ministers and need training and development to support them in this role. A member development programme is already underway, having been piloted by the Children and Young People's board members and is being rolled out to other boards.

Recommendation 6

Board and task group member induction needs to be improved.

2.7 This recommendation is agreed. The current induction system will be reviewed and implemented to ensure that members appointed to the newly reconstituted boards are better informed about the Association, its ways of working and the role that members are expected to fulfil.

Recommendation 7

The LGA allowances system should reflect any increased responsibilities undertaken by members.

Recommendation 8

The allowances review should also consider the provision of allowances for substitute members when they are attending a board in place of a board member; and groups should be asked to consider providing support for substitutes attending board meetings as observers.

2.8 Group Leaders have already established an independent review of member allowances. The issues raised by the Scrutiny Panel in relation to the operation of the member allowances scheme will be referred to Declan Hall who has been appointed to lead the review. The Executive will receive the findings of the review in September. The political group offices will ensure members who attend board meetings as substitutes are fully briefed and supported.

Recommendation 9

Consideration should be given to the potential benefits of lobbying opposition MP's and Peers

2.9 This recommendation is agreed. As part of their lobbying and relationship management strategy, each board has identified key stakeholders who are essential to influence. These include opposition MPs and Peers as appropriate. Attendance at

the party conferences in the Autumn and Spring also focuses on opportunities to influence parliamentarians of all parties.

3.0 Member Task Groups

Recommendation 10

That boards should still make use of member task groups to undertake time-limited tasks on their behalf.

3.1 Member task groups were one of the principle ways proposed in the member structures review for ensuring a wider range of members were engaged in the Association's work. The Executive is pleased to note the Scrutiny Panel's assessment that some task groups have completed their work successfully and have made a useful contribution to policy development. It is recognised however, that the task group model has not been as successful as originally envisaged and that a number of boards have found the task group system difficult to operate. This seems to be primarily because of the administrative arrangements and processes put in place for establishing them, but also because some boards have been more reluctant than others to hand over work, particularly around their core interventions, to groups of 'external' members. Despite these problems, the Executive continues to endorse the task group model as a way of engaging a wider range of members in our work. It is accepted for the task group model to work, further work will be required to simplify the administrative processes (see responses to recommendation 12).

Recommendation 11

That consideration should be given to the sorts of tasks best suited to time-limited investigations

3.2 It is pleasing that the Scrutiny Panel recognises that task groups have done much good work and that they can continue to fulfil a valuable role for the LGA. It is accepted however, that task groups have been generally more successful where they have focused on specific tasks such as policy formulation in new areas, rather than reacting to other time critical agendas, or acting as substitutes for the former Executives. Programme Directors working with each of the Boards will ensure opportunities for task and finish group activity continue to be developed.

Recommendation 12

That an urgent review of the process for the establishment of task groups be undertaken to ensure that they are established in a shorter time span, including whether the LGA executive really needs to continue to approve formally the establishment of task groups.

3.3 The process for establishing task groups via the LGA Executive was originally put in place to ensure that the Association's resources could be

corporately managed and focussed on delivering priority work. There was concern at the time that there might have been pressure to introduce more task groups than could be effectively resourced. Experience has shown this is not an issue. The budget for member task groups has been successfully transferred to the political group offices who have helped to ensure that all task group proposals are monitored effectively. It is accepted that the approval process could probably be relaxed, and that board chairs could be responsible for updating the Executive on task group activity via the monthly update reports to the Executive.

4.0 Member Engagement

Recommendation 13

The benefits of groupings below the boards to cater for the policy development of specific service interests should be explored.

4.1 This recommendation is accepted. The group leaders will consider as part of the review of the areas covered by the Environment and Regeneration boards, how policy development of specific service groups could be given better representation (see response to recommendation 3).

Recommendation 14

Much more needs to be done to devise, and publicise, alternative, and convincing ways of handling traditional policy areas outside the board model, whether through more policy review groups; the central bodies; professional officer advisory networks or other means. Advice from the professional officer advisory networks could also be available to Boards, as required.

4.2 This recommendation is accepted and Boards will be encouraged to experiment with new ways of consulting, engaging and communicating with member authorities about their priorities. As part of the staffing review of the policy directorate, it has been recognised that we need to establish new mechanisms for engaging panels of advisers from member authorities to support our work. These advisers will provide advice and evidence, particularly in responding to Government consultations and managing the routine business which can distract us from the 'doing less, but better' strategy. Panels have already been established for planning (via the planning officers society), CLOA (cultural services, arts, heritage, sport, tourism, museums etc); Strategic Housing (15 senior officers from a range of councils across the country with a variety of stock options); and an environmental advisory panel (engaging senior officers from across the country). These mechanisms are proving to be extremely useful in assisting the association in responding to consultations, producing draft submissions for select committee inquiries and representing the association at regular meetings with senior civil servants to promote the association's lobbying aims. The new business managers appointed as part of the policy review will work with Programme Directors to expand this type of

activity in other areas, ensuring that we have a wider range of authorities from across the country directly engaging in the Association's work.

LGA Executive

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