

Round-up of activity: Board EU lobbying priorities, institutions and international activities

Summary

At an earlier meeting, European and International Board (E&I) Members requested a regular update on recent developments on each of our key priority topics. In addition, the Board routinely receives an update of recent developments in the European and international bodies to which it nominates members and on the LGA's international activities.

Recommendation

Members are asked to comment on the report and make any recommendations for officers to action.

Action

Officers to take action as directed by Members.

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A: BOARD EU LOBBYING PRIORITIES

EU funds 2014-20

1. After two years of negotiations, the EU has agreed both its overall budget for 2014-20, and the rules governing the European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds for 2014-20. Following the successful LGA lobbying campaign led by E&I Board members, the vast majority of councils' demands have been included in the new regime: new instruments for local delivery, stronger central-local partnership working, and simplified common processes covering each of the funds. The focus is now on ensuring that Government makes the most of the new opportunities afforded by the EU regime. More details on the agreement can be found here:
http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/what/future/index_en.cfm

Shadow Programme Growth Board

2. The shadow Programme Growth Board (PGB) for the 2014-2020 ESI Funds has been established by Whitehall to put in place delivery arrangements for the new programme. It met for the second time on 6 November. The meeting was very positive and calls from local government and LEPs that central Government should work with local partners to ensure the new ESIF arrangements are co-designed with local partners, joined up and simplified to enable projects to flow freely were well received.
3. These issues are highlighted in the Local Government Association paper, which can be viewed here: http://www.local.gov.uk/european-and-international/-/journal_content/56/10180/5661584/ARTICLE.

Rewiring public services

4. The LGA worked with Members of the European Parliament ahead of a key vote on 21 October to ensure strict new EU data protection rules do not place undue burdens on councils' public service delivery. The rules as proposed by the European Commission are designed for big businesses and do not currently contain the proper derogations to allow councils to easily deal with personal data for public interest purposes.
5. In October, the LGA joined up with similar associations across Europe to respond to EU proposals which will require councils to accept e-invoices rather than paper-based ones from their suppliers. The EU's proposals will require councils to adapt their payment systems and associated software to conform with a new EU standard invoice which is currently under development. The LGA is seeking to ensure a limited number of common technical standards are agreed, and that there will be a sufficient time period allowed for councils to adapt their payments processing software.
6. The LGA's *Rewiring Public Services* campaign and approach to ensuring fiscal devolution to councils has been presented by both members and officers at a range of different meetings in Brussels.

Item 2

Public Procurement

7. The new EU procurement rules are scheduled to be agreed at EU level in January 2014. The new rules are likely to come into force in the UK at a date to be determined by Government in late 2014 or 2015, rather than by 2016 as required by the Directive. The Cabinet Office is favouring an early implementation as the new rules streamline the procurement process.
8. Gains from the LGA lobbying campaign led by E&I Board members include: shorter procurement timescales; new abilities to pool services with neighbouring authorities; and a greater ability to negotiate with suppliers to ensure best value in public contracts.
9. The LGA's focus is now on working closely with councils to respond to a series of 15 Cabinet Office consultations about implementing the Directive. There are several important areas, such as social services contracts, the approach to SMEs, and new forms to publicise contracts, which have been left to Member States to decide how to implement. We will want to ensure no national 'gold plating' of the Directive. The work on implementation is now being led by the LGA's Improvement and Innovation Board, as part of the LGA's 'productivity' offer to councils.

B: INSTITUTIONS

EU Committee of the Regions

November Plenary

10. The Committee of the Regions (CoR) is an advisory body of the EU, comprising 350 local and regional politicians from across the EU. It defends the interests of local councils in formal EU decision-making.
11. During the CoR November plenary session, the chair of the EP Committee on Regional Development, Danuta Hübner, took stock of the new rules governing the EU Cohesion Policy 2014-2020. Although adoption of the new rules will now enable governments to start allocating funds, controversial points still remain, such as the EU's new ability to suspend payments to projects in Member States whose governments have a high national debt: known as 'macro-economic conditionality'. The limited resources available for the European Social Fund is also a concern.
12. The plenary also considered the main challenges in 2014. Commission Vice-President Šefčovič presented the Commission's work programme. The CoR then agreed its political priorities for the coming year giving particular emphasis on youth unemployment, the review of the EU growth Strategy and the 2014 European elections.
13. The plenary adopted the report by LGA member Cllr Roger Stone which considered critically the implementation by Member States of their national strategies for Roma integration. Also adopted were reports from Welsh Assembly members Mick Antoniw AM on Public Employment Services, and Rodri Glyn Thomas AM on state aids to fisheries.

Item 2

Member Nominations

14. There are currently eight member nominations, from all four political groups, which were nominated by LGA earlier in the year (some dating back to February 2013) but are still with Brussels or Whitehall awaiting ratification. These vacancies significantly affect UK voting strength. The Leader of the UK Delegation has written to the new UK Ambassador to the EU to demand that these be expedited where they have already been referred from the Prime Minister to Brussels.

Composition

15. This Board has previously received reports on the need for the national composition of CoR to be recalibrated following accession of Croatia to the EU. A proposal is expected from the European Commission early 2014, which will be used by the UK and other large countries to seek a rebalancing towards the template used by the European Parliament, which better reflects the population balance of the EU and therefore mitigates a democratic deficit.

Council of European Municipalities & Regions (CEMR)

Policy Committee 2-3 December 2013

16. The Council of European Municipalities & Regions (CEMR) is the European LGA, with member from over 40 national LGAs from across Europe, collectively representing over 100,000 local councils. It is formally consulted by the European Commission on issues likely to affect local government at an early stage in the preparation of new laws, making it an influential advocate.
17. The Policy Committee is the CEMR steering body, meeting every six months to set political priorities, manage budget etc. This meeting was the first of the new 3-year mandate and included elections to political positions. LGA member Cllr Gordon Keymer was appointed as CEMR Vice-President (UK) and elected as Chair of the Finance Committee. UK membership is as follows:
- 17.1. Cllr Gordon Keymer (LGA, CON), Tandridge Council
SUB: Cllr David Shakespeare (LGA, CON), Buckinghamshire Council
 - 17.2. Cllr Keith Wakefield (LGA, LAB), Leeds Council
SUB: TBC (LGA, LAB)
 - 17.3. Cllr Sian Reid (LGA, LD), F, Cambridge City Council
SUB: TBC (LGA, LAB)
 - 17.4. Cllr Linda Gillham (LGA, IND), Runnymede Council
SUB: Cllr Joanne Beavis (LGA, CON), Braintree Council
 - 17.5. Cllr Mairi Evans (CoSLA, SNP), Angus Council
SUB: Cllr Gary Robinson (CoSLA, Ind), Shetland Council
 - 17.6. Cllr Bob Bright (WLGA, LAB), Newport Council

Item 2

SUB: Cllr Ronnie Hughes (WLGA, LAB), Conwy Council

17.7. Cllr John Matthews (NILGA, ALL), Larne Borough Council
SUB: Cllr Frances Renton (CoSLA, LD), Scottish Borders Council

18. The meeting also adopted CEMR's policy priorities for 2014, which largely replicate the draft LGA priorities and adopted position papers on state aid to regional airports; occupational health and safety, and urban-rural areas.

Congress of the Council of Europe

Congress Peer review of UK Local Democracy

19. Congress is the local government arm of the Council of Europe, based in Strasbourg. The Council of Europe seeks to promote peace and reconciliation, to defend human rights and rule of law, and to develop democracy and good governance. The Congress acts as the guardian of local democracy and good governance, which it achieves by scrutinising how each country implements the provisions of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and it organises election observation missions to ensure fair and transparent electoral processes.

20. As reported previously, the Congress is conducting a "peer review" of how the UK is respecting its commitments under the European Charter of Local Self-Government (the Charter, signed in 1998, sets benchmarks for central-local relations, financial autonomy, and good governance).

21. The Congress has now completed two fact-finding visits and is preparing its draft report, which will go to the Monitoring Committee on 19 February and final adoption in mid-March 2014. The draft report will be circulated to members of this Board in early January.

October Plenary Session

22. The Congress meets twice a year to adopt committee reports and to debate current issues relevant to local government, democracy and human rights. At the October plenary session, several debates focused on local and regional responses to the economic crisis and challenges in the sphere of social cohesion. There were debates on, in particular, "Integration through self-employment: promoting local entrepreneurship of migrants", "Migrants' access to regional labour markets" and "Regionalisation and devolution in Europe in a context of economic crisis".

23. The session was also the occasion of a special ceremony for the European Charter of Local Self-Government, now that it covers all 47 member states of the Council of Europe. There were several monitoring reports ("peer reviews") concerning Ireland, Hungary, Ukraine, Albania and Denmark, as well as reports on local elections in Armenia and Macedonia.

C: INTERNATIONAL

Commonwealth Local Government Forum

24. The Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) is a voluntary membership organisation of ministries and associations of local government in 40 Commonwealth nations. Since its creation in 1995, British local government has been an active member of CLGF.
25. Cllr Barrett represented the LGA at a meeting of CLGF's European Members on 24 October. The theme of the meeting was 'local government innovation at a time of austerity'. With local government representatives from Cyprus, Malta and the UK, it gave delegates an opportunity to share experiences and international learning.
26. On Thursday 7 November, Cllr Barrett met with the Executive Committee of the CLGF, which included Deputy Chair of the Board, Cllr Richard Kemp, and CLGF Board Member, Cllr Dave Wilcox. It provided an opportunity to discuss issues affecting local government across the wider Commonwealth and the post-2015 development agenda.
27. On the 8 November the LGA Chairman, Sir Merrick Cockell hosted a meeting of the CLGF Executive Committee in London. Promoting local economic development is a growing priority in the LGA's discussions with Commonwealth counterparts. The aim of the discussion was to think more creatively about how CLGF and its members can be more proactive in promoting local/national approaches to international trade across the Commonwealth. The LGA is seeking to build on recent work with UKTI on pushing the case for a greater role for local government in contributing to national growth policies by promoting inward investment and accessing export markets.