

Environment and Housing Board: Review of the Year

Background

1. The Board has focused this year on the many ways councils promote and support growth through their work on planning, housing, waste and environmental issues. We have also devoted a major effort to helping councils respond to this year's flooding. The Board has had a number of lobbying successes, worth £1.2 billion to local taxpayers.

Planning

2. The LGA has worked to highlight the positive role that councils play through the planning system to promote and facilitate development. This has included a series of publications and joint work with the development industry to showcase partnership and early engagement in the planning process and to demonstrate that issues are best addressed by the sectors working together rather than blunt reforms to the planning system. This has borne fruit in clear Ministerial statements of the centrality of local democratic decision making in planning, and widespread recognition of the backlog of planning permissions for 500,000 homes granted by councils but yet to be built out by the industry.
3. We have campaigned on councils' behalf against changes to the planning regime which threaten to undermine local decision making and to ensure that appropriate weight is given to local plans as they emerge. The Planning Advisory Service has worked with 91 per cent of planning authorities to provide a range of support from plan making to improved planning services. This included support to councils in response to the Government's new performance regime with the result that only 2 councils were designated.

Housing

4. Our campaign for greater financial flexibilities for council led investment in housing has gained widespread support from a range of stakeholder organisations and parliamentarians across all parties. The government responded to our campaign by lifting the borrowing limits for the Housing Revenue Account by £300 million.
5. Representations from the LGA led the Government to reverse its decision to top slice the New Homes Bonus outside London. This returned £330 million to local councils outside London.
6. We have highlighted the role that councils play to bring forward housing locally and their potential to play a stronger role in housing delivery if provided with the necessary flexibilities and resources. We have given evidence and other support to the independent review of the role of local authorities in housing supply led by Cllr House and Natalie Elphick, and to the Labour Party's review of housing by Sir Michael Lyons.

Waste

7. Our Wealth from Waste campaign repositioned recycling as an economic opportunity. The LGA's Reuse Commission explored opportunities for both councils and individuals in reusing more material and estimated that there is up to £400 million of untapped value available each year to taxpayers, charities, businesses and consumers by increasing the amount that we reuse. The government also listened to our calls to freeze landfill tax which will now be effectively frozen in 2015/16, saving both householders and councils nearly £60 million in 2015/16.

Flooding

8. In response to the severe weather and flooding which affected many areas this winter, the LGA actively supported the councils affected; securing significant media coverage on the ways in which they were assisting their communities securing, ensuring councils' concerns were raised with Ministers. The Government responded to our calls for additional funding by committing an additional £270 million for flood defences over the next three years, £184 million for road repairs and £135.25 million in other recovery funding schemes for councils, communities and businesses. The Government has also confirmed that it will review the Bellwin scheme in line with LGA calls.

Environment

9. The LGA has called for an appropriate mechanism to fund the maintenance of Sustainable Drainage Systems. We have maintained that the implementation of requirements to evaluate, approve, adopt and maintain drainage in new developments will not place un-financed burdens on councils once implemented.
10. 89 councils have signed up to the LGA's Climate Local support service, committing to over 1500 local actions on adaptation and mitigation. The LGA has secured resource to continue the programme for a further year to March 2015 via a renewed secondment from the Environment Agency.

Energy

11. The LGA published research, case studies and policy proposals to press for a stronger role for local authorities in the delivery and roll out of energy efficiency schemes. This work secured press coverage and the LGA continues to raise the role of local authorities through its engagement with Ministers and in representations to the Energy and Climate Change Select Committee.
12. We have also campaigned for a larger share of the benefit from Shale Gas (fracking) operations for communities in areas that give them planning permission. We welcomed the Government's announcement that councils will retain 100% of business rates from fracking, but will continue to make the case for a more generous community benefit package.

External engagement and wider activity

13. The profile and influence of the Board has remained high with the Chair and members of the Board meeting with Ministers from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), Department of Energy & Climate Change (DECC) and Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) regularly. Engagement at a senior level with key partners including the Environment Agency, the British Property Federation, the Homes and Communities Agency, the National Housing Federation and UK Onshore Oil and Gas (UKOOG) has strengthened relationships and added weight to our lobbying.
14. Members of the Board have given evidence to eight Select Committees and All Party Parliamentary Groups across the Board's remit and have represented the LGA at numerous conferences and events. The Board has also maintained a strong media presence with around 50 press releases and almost 160 media mentions since September 2013.

Contact Officer: Paul Raynes
Position: Head of Programmes
Phone no: 0207 664 3037
E-mail: Paul.Raynes@local.gov.uk