

European and International Board: Review of the Year

1. In its last year of operations, the Board has delivered a wide-ranging lobbying programme to ensure that European regulations and standards provide new opportunities for councils and that any unfunded proposals are challenged.
2. This report sets out some of the big achievements in 2013/14. Our lobbying work has been achieved through the contribution of many members, including the LGA Chairman, Board members, our delegations to the EU Committee of Regions, CEMR (European LGA) and Congress.

£5.3 billion EU Funds for local areas

3. The Board's primary focus over the past 12 months has been ensuring England's European Structural and Investment Fund (ESIF) programme for 2014-2020 is driven by councils and LEP area partners.
4. The final EU Regulations governing ESIF funds for 2014-20 were published in December 2013. Following two years of intensive LGA engagement in Brussels the crucial role councils play in helping to design and deliver the funds is now explicitly recognised and governments are bound by new requirements to work in partnership with local authorities. The new rules also allow for much greater devolution of funding to the local level.
5. Based upon these lobbying gains in Brussels and through strong leadership from senior LGA representation on the UK's European Growth Board, the UK's plan for spending £5.3 billion is based on local delivery through Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP) areas. Whilst our ambition for local leadership was greater than the partnership with Government allowed, councils and their local partners will now lead delivery of £5.3 billion funding to 2020.

Public Procurement rules revised

6. Close engagement with the institutions in Brussels since September 2013 has helped to secure a final set of new public procurement rules which will be more beneficial to councils than those currently in place. Shorter procurement timescales will be possible; the bidding process will be simplified for SMEs through the use of e-procurement; negotiation with suppliers will be made easier; and certain shared services arrangements between councils will be excluded from the rules, due to come into effect by the end of 2014. The LGA has also worked to ensure a comprehensive training programme is now in place for practitioners.

English standards of central/local relations challenged by international peer review

7. In early 2014, the Congress of the Council of Europe endorsed a final report of a peer review of UK local democracy. Congress reviews how international standards of local democracy (as set out in the Charter of Local Self Governance, to which the UK is a signatory) apply across Europe.

8. Our LGA delegation to Congress and the LGA's leading members provided much of the evidence for the review. The final report is very balanced. It establishes that as an advanced democracy, the UK is in general compliance with the Charter and that there have been improvements since the last review in 1998, particularly the reduction in administration and inspection burdens on councils and the devolution of powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, the report identifies areas where UK falls below the international standards established by the Charter, particularly in the area of adequate financial resources and constitutional safeguards. The report also raises the questions about the lack of devolution in England and the greater financial pressures on English councils compared to other parts of the UK.
9. The report clearly backs much of the LGA's lobbying work on finance and the future sustainability of funding in England. Group Offices are now presenting the report to their front-bench teams in order to secure the changes the report recommends in English local democracy.

Wider international endorsement of local government

10. The Board has been working closely with partners across Europe and the Commonwealth in welcoming a new era of international aid policy. Based on pressure from local government (including the LGA), the European Commission has announced a revised policy on development and aid which favours delivery by local practitioners rather than expensive consultants. This is a significant endorsement of the stature of local government across Europe and a recognition that peer-to-peer improvement is the most effective form of support. Through the Commonwealth LGA (CLGF), we are working with international colleagues to ensure that this new high-level announcement is followed up with detailed delivery and budgetary proposals.

Looking forward

11. With the new European Parliament and Commission in the first of its five year term, the 2015 EU work programme (Brussels equivalent of the Queen's Speech) is likely to be a wide-ranging package of legislative and regulatory change. The 2015 programme will be developed by the new Commission from September and will be heavily influenced by the new Parliament. It is expected to include reviews of national climate change, waste and air pollution responsibilities. We should expect new initiatives favoured by newly-appointed Commissioners and in response to the political impact of the European elections.
12. Under the new governance structure, this work will be taken forward by the Chairman and the LGA Executive in future, with the Resources Board leading on EU funding programmes. Given the heavy EU legislative programme in 2015, it is important for councils that international work is now at the centre of the LGA. The Leadership Board has discussed the detail of the way forward and the new Chairman is already working with the Brussels Office to develop a lobbying programme for the autumn.

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