

People & Places Board – report from Cllr Kevin Bentley (Chairman)

Devolution

1. Work has continued on the Devolution APPG Inquiry, with Cllr Morris Bright MBE, Vice Chairman of the People & Places Board sitting on the APPG Inquiry Panel. The Inquiry's report, looking at how central and local government can work more effectively together, and how reforming Whitehall could strengthen devolution and improve outcomes for communities, was published on 9 March. The report finds that a strong economic recovery, levelling-up, and improved health outcomes will be held back without greater devolution, and recommends that the Government should move towards a localist settlement that allows councils to drive green and inclusive growth, increase fiscal decentralisation, including new tax setting powers for local government, give councils the power to lead on designing and delivering employment and skills offers, and ensure that the reform of ICSs offers genuine health devolution and commissioning powers for local authorities.
2. The report looks ahead to the anticipated Local Economic Recovery and Devolution White Paper, arguing that it should include a clear statement of purpose for the Government's devolution policy, and that powers may be devolved to local government without having to go through structural change. The White Paper should include a National Devolution Baseline for England, and central and local government should collaborate on this to draw up a list of new powers available to every council without the need to negotiate a devolution deal.

Employment and Skills

3. I gave oral evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee on green jobs in March. Our written and oral evidence focused on [analysis](#) commissioned by this Board and the City Regions Board on low carbon job creation by local authority by 2030 and 2050. It was a good opportunity to land messages about the importance of place-based decision making to better align infrastructure spending and skills and employability funding.
4. Last year we submitted evidence to the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee: Employment and COVID-19: time for a new deal. It recommended that Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions devolve more programmes and resources to local areas, employers and directly to education and training providers. Earlier this month the Government's published its [response](#) setting out what steps it has taken on jobs in response to the pandemic, and responded to the Committee's recommendations.
5. We continue to use First magazine to focus on the need for local solutions to support young people in education employment and training. This includes an article on how [Kickstart](#) can work to best effect locally plus additional article which on learning from [Derbyshire's 'I-Step re-engagement programme](#) and [Hampshire's employment and skills hub](#) .

EU Funding/UKSPF

6. Through the Growth Programme Board and the Performance and Dispute Resolution National Sub Committee, the LGA continued the work in shaping the Reserve Fund (the remaining ERDF and ESF programme) to support recovery. Having previously raised concerns about DWP not fully utilising the ESF programme before we leave the ESIF programme, there is evidence of significant improvements in the ESF appraisal process which will mean it is more likely that the total of the fund will be spent when we leave the programme in 2023.
7. The Government has launched the prospectus for the [UK Community Renewal Fund](#), the pilot programme to inform the design of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. County Councils and Mayoral Combined Authorities will act as the Lead Authorities for the fund, which is a first step to making the domestic replacement for the ESIF programme to be a place based fund, driven by locally democratic leaders. The Government has committed to work with the LGA EU Exit Taskforce to help inform the design of the UKSPF.

Freeports

8. East Midlands Airport, Felixstowe & Harwich, Humber, Liverpool City Region, Plymouth and South Devon, Solent, Teesside and Thames have been successful in the Freeports bidding process for England. It is vital that Freeports create new jobs and opportunities for local people and we have called on Government to remain alive to the risk of economic displacement of UK domestic businesses as it progresses with winning areas.
9. There were over thirty bids for Freeport status from across the country evidencing a high-level interest from local areas. We have asked Government to continue to consider how it can best work with the unsuccessful areas as part of its wider ambition to 'level up' the country and ensure no area is left behind.

Strengthening the recovery and resilience of rural and coastal areas

10. Last November, the Board commissioned work to explore how to strengthen recovery and resilience in rural and coastal areas. The final report will consider the impact of COVID-19 outside cities and outline the underlying and structural challenges they face such as population sparsity, remoteness/connectivity and peripherality. The report will propose what steps national and local government can take to tackle these issues within the current context.

The Future of Parish and Town Council Devolution

11. Following discussions at the Board, and an emerging narrative from Ministers supporting greater devolution to parish and town councils, the Board approved the commissioning of research to explore the implications of operationalising "double devolution." The project will provide a practical guide for councils and help ensure Board members are well placed to lead the policy debate on devolution and the future of town and parish councils at the most appropriate future point.

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