

City Regions Board: Report from Cllr Sir Richard Leese CBE (Chairman)

1. Since the Board agreed its work programme in April, devolution has shot to the top of the public policy agenda. As a result, the City Regions Board decided to refresh its focus for the rest of the year in order to really capitalise on the growing momentum towards devolution. The detailed work in the priority areas agreed by the Board is playing an important part of that endeavour, by providing us compelling new evidence with which to illustrate and press our case.

Devolution and public service reform

2. On 11 December, I spoke on behalf of the City Regions Board at a seminar on devolution with the LGA Executive. I set out some personal reflections from my involvement with the Greater Manchester negotiations, particularly that we need to avoid pitching devolution as an act of faith and rather position it as a real solution backed by tangible evidence. With the LGA now working on a vision and route-map for achieving devolution within the UK over the course of the next parliament, City Regions Board members will be discussing how we can help shape that vision at our next meeting on 19 January.
3. As public service reform is a priority for local government as a whole, the City Regions Board and People and Places Board have joined together to commission a research project to refresh the evidence and develop a model for public service transformation across the local public sector in non-metropolitan and city areas. Board members are looking forward to using the final report, due in February, as a platform for a deeper discussion of how to advance the case for public service reform with a future government as the framework for the next Spending Review is being developed.

Skills, Employment and Welfare Reform

4. The City Regions and People and Places Board commissioned the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion (Inclusion) to provide a series of reports which sets out the future skills and employment challenges that will hit the desk of an incoming (or returning) minister. The first report (which was presented to members of the Board in July) focused on place and looked at whether current employment and skills policy would deliver skills for future jobs in a range of cities. Interim findings from the second Inclusion report looking at the current national skills, employment and welfare system from the perspective of individuals was presented at the City Regions Board meeting on 19 January. A third and final report giving conclusions to the research papers will be delivered in March.

5. The City Regions and Children and Young People Boards jointly commissioned the National Institute of Economic Research (NIESR) to review the advantages of local delivery from council-led employment schemes supporting people towards work. This report has now been completed. It reveals that the local schemes support some of the most vulnerable groups in society. It will be published in January. The foreword is co-authored by the chairs of the City Regions, Children and Young People and People and Places Boards. NIESR attended the City Regions Board on 19 January to present its findings.

Trade and investment

6. Earlier this year, members agreed that there were significant gaps in national trade and inward investment policy in terms of harnessing the full potential of city regions. We commissioned Oxford Economics to produce long-term projections of national economic performance if current trends hold, with additional reference to the role of England's city-regions in generating exports and attracting investment.
7. The final report, delivered last month, confirms that that the UK's global economic competitiveness is at significant risk of deterioration based on current trends. It also shows that there is significant scope for city-regions to play a greater role and help boost national performance through better leveraging of key specialisms and competitive advantages that exist in different areas.
8. Our work in this area has attracted significant interest from third parties such as the British Property Federation and Universities UK. We will be working with them to develop proposals for reforms to national policy and delivery arrangements that we can use to influence the thinking of ministers from May 2015.

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