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People & Places Board: Review of the Year

Background

1. The People and Places Board was established in February 2014 alongside the City Regions Board and first met in April. Its purpose was to represent the interests of the non-city areas; develop greater clarity on the role of non-metropolitan authorities in driving economic growth for the long term benefit of residents; and give guidance on how transformation of public services and devolution to non-metropolitan England can enable that growth. At the end of its first eighteen months, it is appropriate to reflect on this purpose, work to date, and future direction.
2. This paper is offered not as a comprehensive review of the Board, but as a starting point to provoke discussion. Members' views are welcome on any issues which could strengthen the LGA's work for non-metropolitan areas.
3. Members may wish to consider the following issues in their reflections on whether the Board is meeting its original purpose: the continued need for a strong non-metropolitan influence within the LGA, areas for further development and the changing geography and governance of non-metropolitan areas.

Context

4. The Board was established following a review of the LGA's governance arrangements and with a need expressed by members for non-city areas to have a focused platform to shape LGA policy.
5. The Board was given a mandate by the LGA Executive to create its own work programme and play a greater influencing/advocacy role on behalf of non-metropolitan areas in England. The Board was also allocated specific staff and financial resources to support the delivery of its mandate.
6. The Board has been an authoritative voice for the non-metropolitan areas. Supported by the work of the influential Non-Metropolitan Commission, which it commissioned, the Board has made a strong representation for devolution to, and public service reform in, the non-metropolitan areas. This has balanced the case for additional powers to be devolved to the major cities of England that has to date been more widely accepted by Whitehall and has brought a broader perspective to the national and local debate about devolution within England. A full list of the Board's activities and achievements is included at Appendix A.

Maintaining a strong non-metropolitan voice in the LGA

7. In creating the Board, there was a clear desire for a strong and distinct voice within the LGA which would cast a non-metropolitan lens on priority work. There was also a desire to ensure that LGA's positions on important issues such as devolution reflected those at the cutting edge of policy rather than the collective capacity of all councils.

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8. Over the last year, the Board has been asked to lead a number of important policy issues on behalf of the LGA. For example, our recent devolution report reflects a clear steer from this Board and recognises the needs for LGA advocacy to reflect councils working at very different paces. This demonstrates a change of approach within the LGA.
9. If we look to the future, bespoke local deals will drive the devolution agenda and there is a risk of the sector appearing fractured. There has been strong pressure on the LGA and this Board to continue to pull together a united voice for councils, especially given the unprecedented financial constraints that are expected. In developing the recent devolution work, the People and Places and City Regions Boards have demonstrated that they are able to act collectively and unite behind a common set of propositions which reflect different geographies when local government's collective voice needs to be heard. Members may wish to consider those policy areas where there needs to be more joint working with the City Regions Board and those where specific advocacy on behalf of non-metropolitan areas is needed. This will be particularly important in the context of the devolution debate, where there remains some uncertainty about Government's offer to non-metropolitan areas and the governance arrangements that might be required.

Working with other Boards

10. Over the course of the year, there has been some duplication of work with other Boards, particularly the Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board. This has led to members receiving a preponderance of update reports, limiting the scope for value-added debate and decision-making. As we move forward, members might like to consider how to shift the Board's emphasis towards developing a work programme, with the Cities Regions Board where appropriate, that focuses on wider strategic issues and avoids duplicating work being undertaken in other Boards.

Changing nature of non-metropolitan areas

11. In designing the original membership of the Board, it was recognised that the political geography of non-metropolitan areas needed to be reflected in the composition of the Board. Thus the Board's membership is drawn from the County Councils Network, District Councils' Network and other non-metropolitan unitary authorities. The Board's political proportionality reflects non-metropolitan councils, differing from other LGA policy boards whose make-up reflects the political proportionality of the Association as a whole.
12. The political geography of non-metropolitan areas in England has continued to evolve. There are now three non-metropolitan areas¹ moving forward at pace to form combined authorities, with work also well underway in Cornwall and discussions taking place in many more areas. Members may wish to consider how combined authorities and other new bodies should be reflected in the membership and the ongoing work of the Board.

¹ In Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, and Bournemouth, Poole and Dorset

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APPENDIX A

The work programme

1. During the year, the Board has focused on the following priorities:
 - 1.1. Public service reform;
 - 1.2. Housing;
 - 1.3. Planning and infrastructure to support growth (in particular rural broadband);
 - 1.4. Jobs and skills; and
 - 1.5. Devolution and the report of the Non-Metropolitan Commission
2. The Board has been keen to see English devolution high on the new Government's agenda and has worked closely with the City Regions Board to that end, but recognised the need to provide balance to the government focus on devolution to city regions alone. As such the Board asked Sir John Peace to lead an independent Commission to examine the prospects for economic growth and the future of public service in non-metropolitan England. The Commission's final report was published in March 2015 and complements the work of the Cities Growth and Finance Commissions. In addition the Board has contributed to the development of an LGA paper on English Devolution, which, building on the work of the three Commissions, is designed to inform the Government's programme for devolution in England.
3. At its March meeting, the Board welcomed Viscountess Cobham, Chairman of Visit England, who was a Member of the Commission and embraced the Commission's final report, which was published early in March. At its October 2014 meeting, the Board also received the report on the Review of Local Authorities' Role in Housing Supply by the joint authors Natalie Elphicke and Councillor Keith House.

Independent Commission on Economic Growth and the Future of Public Services in Non-Metropolitan England

4. The independent Non-Metropolitan Commission was established in May 2014. It was led by Sir John Peace, Chairman of Standard Chartered Bank and Burberry and also Lord Lieutenant of Nottinghamshire, supported by senior figures from the voluntary and community sector, health, academia, tourism, environment, transport and housing. It met six times and received evidence from over 60 contributors. The Commission published an interim report in November 2014 and a final report, [*Devolution to Non-Metropolitan England: seven steps to growth and prosperity*](#), in March 2015.
5. The Commission decided to focus on just seven clear recommendations for reform designed to shape the way economic growth and public service transformation are supported in the future. The recommendations were specifically designed to be readily adoptable and deliverable by any new government early in its term in order to give the country a further boost along the road to recovery. The Commission noted that they were also as applicable to city regions as to non-metropolitan areas.
6. The recommendations covered prosperity (skills and foreign direct investment); infrastructure (planning and transport, housing, digital connectivity and investment

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in infrastructure); and governance. The Commission was very clear that they considered the way we take decisions in England is holding us back.

7. The Commission's work has played a key role in building the evidence base for the LGA's lobbying for devolution to be extended to all corners of England.

Skills, Employment and Welfare Reform

8. At the end of March, the LGA put forward the case for groups of councils to have the power, funding and responsibility to integrate and commission employment and skills provision to plan employment and skills investment across places to get more people into work, help low paid people progress in work, and address the skills demand for achieving local growth.
9. Championed by the chairs of the City Regions, People and Places and Children and Young People Boards, the recommendations in [*Realising Talent: a new framework for devolved employment and skills*](#) set out how a localised system of employment and skills provision might work. It is the final in a [*series of three reports*](#) commissioned to the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion to analyse the skills and employment challenges to be faced by an incoming or returning Government, and offer a proposed localised solution. As a result, the LGA is now in a strong position to try to influence decisions about the re-commissioning of the Work Programme in 2016.

Broadband

10. The Board has kept broadband high up on the Government's agenda and set out a clear way forward for new Ministers. Digital connectivity is as important as electricity, planning, housing and transport for living and doing business in the twenty-first century. Members have emphasised the critical need for the mainly rural communities who are already lagging behind in the publicly funded broadband and Wi-Fi rollout to get access to fast and reliable digital connectivity as soon as possible. Broadband is also an essential enabler for wider public service reform which involves staff, residents and businesses communicating, sharing information, accessing services and working online.
11. Members have strengthened our ability to influence Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) by forging a productive relationship with the new Chief Executive, Chris Townsend. Mr. Townsend spoke at LGA Annual Conference and visited councils across the country to get a better understanding of their concerns. As a result of LGA lobbying, councils in the Superfast Broadband Extension Programme benefitted from additional local flexibility over funding. Members set out a compelling vision for the importance of digital technology to driving economic growth and service transformation in our response to the Government's consultation on Future Digital Communications Infrastructure Needs and Select Committee responses throughout the year. The Non-Metropolitan Commission report reinforced the Members' view that we need a radical overhaul of the current funding and commercial model for broadband that promotes competition and recognises the investment potential of rural connectivity. In response to Members' steer, the Planning Advisory Service produced a guide for councils on BDUK's Mobile Infrastructure Project to assist with the rollout and balancing economic and social benefits with the environmental impact.

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Other Issues

12. On housing, in addition to receiving the report on the Review of Local Authorities' Role in Housing Supply, the Board, in conjunction with the Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board focused on:
 - 12.1. Modelling the impact of a locally led approach to housing;
 - 12.2. Pressing for financial flexibilities to enable local authorities to build housing directly and in partnership;
 - 12.3. Developing case studies and sharing good practice that demonstrates the role councils play in increasing housing supply.
13. The Board agreed that the public service transformation strand of the Board's work programme had two objectives:
 - 13.1. To set out a way forward for the transformation of public services in the geographies represented on the Board; and
 - 13.2. To ensure that the future momentum of service transformation is locally and democratically led.
14. In order to progress these objectives, in conjunction with the City Regions Board, it commissioned independent research from Rand Europe to develop further an evidence-based way forward for public service transformation and what can be achieved for residents through a community budgeting type approach at the local level. It also agreed an input to the Independent Service Transformation Panel. Both of which added weight to the argument for devolution and for reform of the way we deliver public services.
15. The Board considered the final report on the Independent Commission on Local Government Finance and amongst other things emphasised that local authorities needed fiscal independence that would come from beyond just the retention of business rates.

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