



Correspondence address:

South East England Councils
Room 215 County Hall
Penrhyn Road
Kingston
Surrey
KT1 2DN

t: 020 8541 7553

e: heatherbolton@secouncils.gov.uk

Mayoral Policy Team
Department for Communities and Local Government Zone 3/J1
Eland House
Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5DU
Email: MayorsConsultation@communities.gsi.gov.uk

20 December 2011

Dear Sir/ Madam

Response to consultation: What can a mayor do for your city?

Introduction

We write on behalf of the membership of South East England Councils (SEEC) and South East Strategic Leaders (SESL). Our two organisations work together to promote the views and interests of all tiers of local government across the South East, representing more than eight million residents. Both voluntary membership bodies, funded by member council subscriptions, we represent the voice of democratically elected local government across the South East of England.

Our members strongly support the principle of devolving powers from central government and public bodies to elected local government. We are therefore disappointed that local authorities outside England's 12 largest cities are excluded from the current proposals. None of these 12 cities is in the South East.

As the Localism Act allows powers to be devolved to any local authority outside London, our members would like to see the offer to transfer powers extended to councils in the South East, and indeed in the rest of the country.

Unlocking growth

During the consultation period, the Government's 'Unlocking Growth' report further addressed the role of eight core cities, highlighting their potential as key drivers of the UK economy. The Autumn Statement also unveiled plans to allow city mayors to borrow against expected income from the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL).

These city-focused approaches risk overlooking the role that South East local authorities – and their leading politicians – play in making our area the engine room of the UK economy. In 2009-10 South East residents contributed £1bn more to the Treasury than the area received in public spending.

As the only area of the UK to make a net contribution over this period, South East political leaders want the opportunity to demonstrate how they can deliver more through greater devolved powers. This applies equally to those areas of the South East that need to maintain global competitiveness – such as the Thames Valley – and those areas that need to improve economic performance – such as the coastal areas.

Given the South East's contribution to the national economy, we believe there is an exceptionally strong case for South East authorities to be included in the proposals for greater devolution of economic and political responsibility.

The South East should not be excluded from greater powers simply because our development is based around several settlements rather than a single dominant city. Our network of smaller cities and towns has consistently delivered better economic performance than larger cities elsewhere in the country.

Devolving powers to improve the prospects of major cities is important to help economic recovery, but we cannot afford to bypass the potential economic benefits for UK PLC of similar devolution to South East local authorities.

For example, powers to borrow against expected CIL income would be very welcome in the South East as a way of ensuring essential infrastructure is in place to support economic and housing growth. We believe this option and other devolved powers should be available to all democratically elected local authorities, regardless of whether they have a directly elected mayor or not.

Strong democratic leaders

The consultation argues that mayors will have a higher profile and greater local recognition than existing council leaders, but our members believe the same result can be achieved through a number of different routes that are not limited to a small number of cities.

One of these routes would be to revitalise local democracy and accountability by devolution of important powers and responsibilities to any willing local authority. Increasing local council responsibility over residents' priorities such as the economy, transport and infrastructure would raise interest and participation in local elections, delivering a high profile for council leaders that could match that of a mayor.

Our members believe that strong locally-elected political leadership does not depend on council structures and direct mayoral elections. Councils in the South East have produced many strong local political leaders under the current system and will continue to do so. Equally, while some directly elected mayors have proved strong leaders, others have a more mixed track record.

Many South East political leaders would greatly value the opportunity to take over functions currently delivered by central government or other public bodies. Restricting this

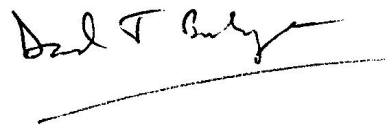
option to cities alone risks creating 'second class' non-city areas, which could lead to declining interest in local democracy.

In the South East we strongly support the consultation aim of driving forward innovative solutions that deliver better services for residents, a stronger economy and greater democratic engagement. The Government can support us in this aim by extending the planned devolution of powers and public functions to any local authority that wishes to take them on.

Yours sincerely



Cllr Paul Carter
Chairman
South East England Councils



Cllr David Burbage
Chairman
South East Strategic Leaders