

**SOUTH EAST ENGLAND COUNCILS
ALL-MEMBER MEETING**



Date: 8 November 2011

Subject: **Localism Bill Update**

Report of: Nick Woolfenden, SEEC Head of Policy Co-ordination

Recommendation:

Members are asked to note progress of the Localism Bill through the House of Lords and amendments that are helping address SEEC's areas of concern.

1.1 The Localism Bill is continuing its progress through the House of Lords. Royal Assent is still possible around the end of the calendar year.

1.2 Following previous member discussions SEEC has provided members of the Lords and MPs with briefings on key issues, available on our website¹. These emphasised that SEEC members:

- Strongly support the principle of localism and devolving responsibility and delivery of services.
- Believe that communities are best served when elected and accountable local government is entrusted with powers, freedoms and flexibilities to respond to their needs effectively and efficiently.
- Support Localism Bill proposals such as a general power of competence for local authorities, the ability to grant business rate discounts and the abolition of regional planning.
- Have concerns about key areas that could hinder effective and accountable localism, and where changes are needed in the Bill:
 - remove unnecessary local referendums
 - simplify neighbourhood planning
 - reduce bureaucracy and central control to free-up local government
 - ensure a workable transition to the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) regime.

1.3 SEEC has received positive responses to issues raised from a number of members of the Lords. These included acknowledgement of the importance of NPPF transitional arrangements from Baroness Hanham, who is leading the Bill through the Lords for the Government, and Baroness Eaton, former Chair of the Local Government Association. Indeed SEEC's briefing on this issue was directly quoted by Lord Best during the Bill's report stage on 17 October².

1.4 Whilst it is too early to fully conclude how far SEEC's issues of concern, echoed by many others in local government, will be addressed in the final Bill, there have been a number of encouraging amendments agreed by the Lords and accepted by Government reflecting SEEC's briefing:

¹ <http://www.secouncils.gov.uk/page/4/view/19/localism-bill>

² <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201011/ldhansrd/text/111017-0001.htm#1110176000058>

- Referendums – removal of the provision which would have allowed local voters to raise a referendum on ‘any local issue’, although it is regretful that provision for council tax and community planning referendums still remain.
- Devolution of powers eg economic development, housing and regeneration – additional provisions have been added which, although driven by a metropolitan cities lobby, could also provide opportunities for other local authorities.
- NPPF – transition arrangements will be addressed, if not within the Bill itself then through other appropriate routes.

1.5 It is also encouraging to see action has been taken to adjust provisions in the Bill to ensure European fines would only be passed on to local government if directly attributable to a local authority.

1.6 SEEC officers will continue to monitor progress of the Bill, identifying any further issues where SEEC should brief decision makers.