

# SOUTH EAST FIRST

*The newsletter of South East England Councils*

July 2010



## The future is local for South East

Greater devolution of powers to local authorities and the future of collective working in the South East were key topics at a special all-member meeting of South East England Councils (SEEC) in June.

SEEC members meeting on 16 June discussed the future of SEEC as a subscription-based organisation representing the 74 South East councils. They also debated the future of regional organisations such as SEEDA and GOSE.

### Lobbying role for SEEC

Members agreed in principle to maintain SEEC as a lobbying organisation, making a case for the South East on behalf of all member councils.

A cross-party councillor working group will meet in July to review the functions and staffing needed to take SEEC forward, working to a maximum subscription level of around £500,000 a year.

The group will present recommendations for approval by all members at the SEEC Annual Meeting on 14 July.

### Abolish SEEDA vote

SEEC members voted overwhelmingly to ask Government to abolish regional development agency, SEEDA, and devolve economic development funding and assets to councils.

There was also a call for urgent consultation with councils on the future of the Government Office for the South East.

SEEC Chairman Cllr Paul Carter said: "The future is local. We need to strip away the old bureaucratic, regional structures quickly and let elected local authority councillors work directly as the link between businesses, central Government and our local communities.

"On the economy, councils in the South East are ready to take on the role of working with businesses in Local Enterprise Partnerships but funding to support the economy is critical to ensure lack of investment in the South East does

not damage the economic prospects of the UK as a whole," added Cllr Carter.

"The South East's economy is the biggest net contributor to Government – every year Government receives £18bn more in taxes than is spent in our area. If we damage that golden goose through lack of investment we will risk our fragile economic recovery and reduce the funds flowing into Government to help reduce the deficit."

Cllr Carter has asked for a meeting with Business Secretary Vince Cable on LEPs and funding.

### SEEC Annual Meeting

SEEC's AGM is on 14 July at Church House, London. All members are encouraged to attend. The agenda includes:

- Election of SEEC Chairman and Executive Committee for 2010-11
- Future SEEC functions, staff & subscriptions.

For 16 June papers see [www.secouncils.gov.uk](http://www.secouncils.gov.uk)

### SEEC Executive and Annual Meeting 14 July 2010

#### Venue:

**Church House Conference Centre, Dean's Yard, Westminster, London SW1P 3NZ**

#### Timings:

09.30am	SEEC Executive pre-meetings
10.00am	SEEC Executive Committee
11.30am	District council meeting
12.15pm	Full group pre-meetings
13.30pm	All-member annual meeting

#### Future SEEC meeting dates

- 15 September 2010: Executive Committee
- 15 October 2010: Executive Committee
- 19 November 2010: All-member meeting

More details at [www.secouncils.gov.uk](http://www.secouncils.gov.uk)

## Changes in South East Political Balance

Results from the elections on 6 May show some significant changes in the political balance of the South East at national level.

The most dramatic change is in the balance of the 84 South East MPs. Opposition parties now hold only 5 of the 84 constituencies in the South East. The remaining seats are held by 75 Conservative MPs and 4 Lib-Dems.

This balance of power is also reflected in ministerial appointments, with some 29 South East Conservative and Lib-Dem MPs holding Government positions.

Before 6 May the political balance of MPs was: 61 Conservative, 17 Labour and 6 Lib-Dems.

There were also several changes in council political control following the local elections but the overall picture has changed less dramatically. Control in the 74 South East councils is now:

Councils with a Conservative majority - 59 (last year: 60)

Councils with a Lib-Dem majority - 6 (last year: 5)

Councils with a Labour majority - 3 (last year: 1)

Councils with an Independent majority - 1 (last year: 1)

Councils with No Overall Control - 5 (last year: 7)

In the No Overall Control councils there are 4 Conservative leaders and 1 Lib-Dem leader.

Political balance on SEEC's Executive Committee remains unchanged at: Conservatives 13 seats; Lib-Dem 4; Labour 2.

## Transport priorities

SEEC members and representatives from partner organisations met on 11 June at a Regional Transport Board meeting.

The future of the Board is under review following Government's decision to abolish regional strategies but this meeting went ahead to complete work in two important areas:

- To press for funding to be released for committed projects including three major rail schemes: the upgrade of Gatwick station; redevelopment of Reading station; and increasing platform capacity at Oxford station.
- To discuss a report setting out what the South East needs to deliver a sustainable

transport system. It is hoped this report, due to be finalised in July, will contribute to South East councils' submission to the Government's autumn spending review.

Also discussed were Olympic travel plans and the case for reopening the Oxford-Bedford rail link.

Visit [www.se-partnershipboard.org.uk](http://www.se-partnershipboard.org.uk) for papers.

## EU Funding Update

Members of SEEC's European Working Group met on 25 May to discuss improving access to EU funding for South East councils.

Group Chairman Cllr Alex King (Kent) said the group would find new ways to identify and access EU money in the new political landscape following the General Election. Changes to bodies that co-ordinate funding, such as SEEDA and GOSE, will not alter the need to promote the South East's interests in Europe. Terms of reference will be written for the Group to reflect this.

Subscription body South East Local Partners agreed to forward basic information on available EU funds to SEEC once a quarter for circulation to all SEEC members.

SEEC has been asked to make nominations to the project selection committee for ERDF funding. The SEEC Executive will also advise the LGA on South East nominations to Europe's Committee of the Regions.

## Economic Development & Skills

SEEC members contributed to a brainstorming session on how to improve delivery of employee training at the Economic Development and Skills Board on 25 May.

The session identified pros and cons in the current approach to inform a high level skills strategy for the South East. There was also discussion on an innovation action plan to support development of innovative, high potential companies.

An update on business critical infrastructure showed that many rural businesses can't access high speed broadband. Board Chairman Alex Pratt (SEEDA) wanted to see businesses sharing high speed broadband used by publicly funded bodies such as hospitals, schools and libraries.

Buckinghamshire CC provided a case study on developing Local Economic Assessments, covering trends and data collected.

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