

# SOUTH EAST FIRST

*The newsletter of South East England Councils*

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## Localism powers must match rhetoric to deliver homes

Localism could be good news for delivering much-needed new housing if Government can deliver a reality that matches the rhetoric, says South East England Councils (SEEC).

But this week's SEEC housing conference revealed councillors' worries that the new system could be more complex and costly for councils than at present. Speakers included local & central government representatives, developers, housing associations and the charity sector.

SEEC Chairman Cllr Paul Carter told the conference. "There are clearly opportunities for local authorities but the balance is currently too much towards challenges rather than cutting red tape and giving us genuine flexibility to meet local needs in our own way.

"Getting a development off the ground in England costs 25% more than it does in mainland Europe because of all the bureaucracy," he added.

### Incentives

"We welcome the idea of incentives such as the New Homes Bonus but the details need refining to make sure the system is fair, accountable and something that will encourage communities to take on new building."

SEEC Executive Committee member Cllr Elizabeth Cartwright also questioned the complexity and cost of the new planning system. "Rules around consultation, referendums and public examinations for each neighbourhood plan may deter communities from getting involved while, for councils, the cost of supporting multiple plans could be very expensive."

Key issues raised at the conference covered:

- The need to give councils freedom & flexibility to develop new approaches to development – for example through innovative partnerships with the private sector
- Incentives may be needed to encourage communities to step up on planning
- Concerns that benefits caps and changes affecting housing associations could reduce the supply of social housing and increase homelessness

### SEEC meeting dates

SEEC will hold three All-member plenary meetings in 2011. The dates are **17 March**, **3 July** (AGM) and **8 November**.

After the 18 February meeting of the Executive, there will be a further three SEEC Executives in 2011 on **7 June**, **27 September** and **16 December**.

- Incentives would help encourage private sector landlords to take on Housing Benefit tenants to relieve pressure on the social rented sector
- Migration – its impact on housing in the South East and value in filling gaps in the economy.

Visit the SEEC website to see copies of speakers' presentations [www.secouncils.gov.uk/housing](http://www.secouncils.gov.uk/housing)

## SEEC challenges RGF bias

SEEC has raised serious concerns about fairness of the £1.4bn Regional Growth Fund (RGF) after it seemed that the South East may not get equal treatment.

Sir Ian Wrigglesworth, Deputy Chairman of the RGF independent advisory panel, told journalists the South East was not in a good position to win RGF funds. He added that areas such as the North East, North West, Yorkshire and the Midlands, where the public sector is more dominant, would fit the criteria much more easily.

SEEC Chairman Cllr Paul Carter took the issue up in the media, arguing that prejudging decisions in this way undermined the whole idea of RGF.

Cllr Carter said: "Councils in the South East fully support the aim of creating more private sector jobs but it is wrong to assume the South East doesn't need help. The South East has over 641,000 public sector jobs – the third highest in the country after London and the North West. The independent panel needs to do its homework before sidelining our funding bids."

South East facts and figures show:

- Nationally, 3 of the 10 districts with the highest share of public sector jobs are in the South East: Oxford (46%); Hastings (43%); Canterbury (41%).
- Between 2003 and 2008 public sector employment in the South East increased faster than in any other region – twice as fast as the national average.
- 500,000 people living in deprived areas – equal to 20% of the entire north east population.

SEEC has now published a briefing paper showing the extent of deprivation and reliance on public sector jobs across the South East. It will raise awareness about diversity in the South East to counter perceptions of the South East as wealthy, with no need for public funding. The huge scale of the South East's population means very high numbers of people living in deprivation compared to other areas of the country and a very high overall number of public sector jobs.

The briefing paper will now be sent to South East MPs. Read it at [www.secouncils.gov.uk/briefing](http://www.secouncils.gov.uk/briefing)

## SEEC: Making the case for the South East

December 2010 saw SEEC feeding member views into three Government policy reviews - on business rates, Housing Revenue Account and the New Homes Bonus.

Members welcomed greater devolution of responsibility to local authorities in all areas. In addition, specific South East points were raised to help ensure effective implementation of each policy:

- Business rates - councils' ability to keep more business rate income would be a good incentive for economic growth. While SEEC members recognise some redistribution of business rates across the country will be needed this must be fair and transparent to avoid creating a disincentive in some council areas.
- New Homes Bonus - extension of the payment period for the New Homes Bonus would help ensure it offers sufficient incentive in high cost areas such as the South East.
- Housing Revenue Account - plans to redistribute debt among landlord councils need to be reviewed for fairness and in the meantime allocation of HRA must take account of realistic maintenance costs.

### Managing ERDF

In January 2011 SEEC was asked for views on new ERDF programme management to remove the function from RDAs.

SEEC agreed that, at present, CLG should take on ERDF management responsibilities but supported retention of specialist local expertise and a key role for councillors in ERDF management committees. The response also raised concerns that plans for aligning ERDF and RGF could narrow the scope of bids; squeeze out bids from high growth areas; and perpetuate concerns that the South East will not be given fair access to funding.

CLG have now confirmed that ERDF staff from RDAs will transfer to CLG by July 2011 and that councillors will be included on management committees. However plans to align RGF and ERDF have also been confirmed.

See our [Speaking for the South East](#) web page for all SEEC's input to Government policy work.

## Migration update

The SEEC-hosted South East Strategic Partnership for Migration (SESPM) is working with partners on a research project to identify the occupations and locations in the South East with a heavy reliance on non-EU migrant workers.

The issue is rising in importance due to the potential impact of the cap on non-EU workers, which may leave gaps in the economy and some jobs difficult to fill.

The research will provide information and guidance for a range of partners including further education colleges planning their curriculums; LEPs looking at gaps in the local skills and jobs market; and the Skills Funding Agency and JobCentrePlus.

SESPM also contributed to consultation on a potential cap on the number of non-EU students accepted into to UK. Key concerns were around the economic impact on South East colleges from loss of income if a limit is placed on the number of fee-paying immigrant students that colleges are allowed to accept. This is a particular issue in the South East due to the high number of reputable English language colleges in coastal areas. SESPM Manager Roy Millard contacted all South East further education colleges, training providers, and a range of private language schools for input.

Four local area strategic migration groups have now been established to co-ordinate work across South East local authorities and partner organisations. The four groups cover Kent & Medway; Surrey & Sussex; Hampshire & Isle of Wight; and Thames Valley

### Can you help cut red tape?

The newly formed Europe task group is calling on SEEC members to suggest ideas for cutting red tape around EU legislation.

The group is keen to identify specific examples where legislation to handle EU requirements has been gold plated and where simplifying the rules could achieve the same results more quickly and cheaply.

Suggestions will be passed through to SEEC's Europe task group, with the potential to become part of a wider national campaign against unnecessary EU bureaucracy with the Local Government Association.

## SEEC task & finish groups set out agenda for work

SEEC's task & finish groups on Europe and Data are now established. Find agendas, notes & terms of reference at [www.secouncils.gov.uk/groups](http://www.secouncils.gov.uk/groups)

The Europe group met on 21 January and 18 February. Its priorities are:

- to identify and share information on European funding available to South East councils
- to aim to influence EU decisions about future funding streams.

Members of the Europe group are: Gordon Keymer (Chairman), Mary Ballin, Robert Bliss, John Gilbey, Lynne Hack, Ian Hudspeth, Alex King, Marl Worrall, Cec Tallack, Paul Baker, Kathy Newbound & James Swindlehurst.

The Data group met on 4 February to identifying a focused 'dashboard' of data, which will help SEEC councils understand strategic issues affecting their areas and influence government decisions on these key issues.

Members agreed 5 broad headings for data. These are: economy & employment; housing & infrastructure; public finance & grants; demography & migration; and environment.

Members of the Data task group are: Mike Appleyard (Chairman), Paul Carter, Elizabeth Cartwright, Myles Cullen, Andrew Cumpsty, Ann Ducker, Moira Gibson, Paul Watkins, Jenni Ferrans, Kelsie Learney & James Swindlehurst.