

**SOUTH EAST ENGLAND COUNCILS
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING**



Date: 11 September 2012

Subject: An independent local government: SEEC views

Report of: Heather Bolton, SEEC Director

Recommendations:

SEEC Executive members are asked to:

- i) Agree key points for a short SEEC response to send to Graham Allen MP on his proposals for independent local government
- ii) Note the consultation deadline of 5 October 2012 for individual responses.

1. Background

- 1.1 At SEEC's July Executive Graham Allen MP, Chairman of the Commons Select Committee on Political and Constitutional Reform, outlined proposals for an independent local government, with much greater control over its own affairs and finances. Consultation on the proposals runs until 5 October, asking for views on the desirability and practicality of formalising central-local relations in statute. A full [consultation draft](#) is available on the select committee's website.
- 1.2 Mr Allen asked members to send him views on the proposals both collectively, via SEEC, and individually. He believes the localism agenda makes this an ideal time to debate independence. If he receives positive backing from all political parties, he hopes the issue could be included in a mid-term refresh of Government priorities.
- 1.3 Individual authority or personal responses should be sent to pcrc@parliament.uk by 5 October 2012.

2. SEEC views

- 2.1 During the July discussion SEEC members welcomed the principles and ambition behind the proposals for independent local government. Links to the localism agenda created a timely opportunity for change. In addition, members raised a number of practical questions and identified barriers to overcome in achieving genuine independence for local government. These included:
 - Greater financial independence for local government is very attractive and funding should be fairer and more transparent. However, there are concerns about some of the practicalities of achieving this. For example:
 - Would central government agree to relax spending controls to permit real local control of finances?
 - How would a self-financing local government handle the need for equalisation between rich and poor authorities?
 - Genuine local democratic responsibility is welcome and important. Local government has transformed itself in the past 20 years, delivering innovation, efficient services and showing it is ready for more responsibility. In some areas, however, there remains uncertainty about how this would operate. For example:
 - Could a statutory role for local government be enforced effectively under the UK's unwritten constitution?
 - Work would be needed to identify which laws and Acts of Parliament would need to be repealed to allow local government autonomy.

- There is a need to clarify which are local powers and which are central powers. Debate is needed on whether local government should take on some services currently delivered centrally, and how such transferred services would be funded.
- Work would be needed to persuade residents, central government and the media to recognise that service levels could, legitimately, be very different in different areas. Any bid to set minimum standards centrally would reduce councils' autonomy and independence.
- Would there need to be a mechanism to identify failing or 'rogue' councils and what would happen to them? However, any sanctions imposed on such councils should not be applied to all other local authorities.

2.2 Members are asked to review para 2.1 and consider these points as the basis of a short SEEC consultation response to Graham Allen.