

**SOUTH EAST ENGLAND COUNCILS
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING**



Date: 9 December 2011

Subject: **SEEC response to consultation on mayoral powers for cities**

Report by: Heather Bolton, SEEC Director

Recommendations:

SEEC Executive members are asked to:

- i) Discuss and agree key issues to include in SEEC's response to the Government's consultation and identify any specific functions that members would like to see transferred to councils in the South East.
- iii) Agree that SEEC's Chairman should approve the final response so it can be submitted by the deadline of 3 January 2012.

1. Introduction

1.1 Last month Government launched consultation on devolving additional powers to elected mayors in the 12 largest English cities. The consultation '*What can a mayor do for your city?*' asks for views on implementing Localism Act powers, which allow the transfer of local public functions to local authorities outside London.

1.2 The Act permits transfer of local public functions to any local authority outside London to:

- Promote economic development or wealth creation
- Increase local accountability in relation to the function.

The consultation, however, asks for views on transferring powers only to elected mayors in the 12 largest English cities. The consultation makes it clear that the role of elected mayor is considered more visible and accountable than that of other council leaders. None of the 12 cities is in the South East. They are Birmingham, Bradford, Bristol, Coventry, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle upon Tyne, Nottingham, Sheffield and Wakefield.

1.3 At the SEEC All-member meeting on 8 November it was agreed that SEEC should submit a brief response to consultation making the case for South East councils to be also considered for devolved powers. Consultation closes on 3 January 2012.

2. Key issues for SEEC's response

2.1 SEEC members strongly support the principle of devolving powers from central government and public bodies to elected local government. It is therefore disappointing that local authorities outside the 12 largest cities are excluded from the current proposals.

- 2.2 As the Localism Bill allows powers to be devolved to any local authority outside London, SEEC would like to see the offer to transfer powers extended to councils in the South East, and indeed in the rest of the country.
- 2.3 The consultation argues that mayors will have a higher profile and greater local recognition than existing council leaders but SEEC members see that 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.
- 2.4 A city-driven agenda also overlooks 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.
- 2.5 Given the South East's contribution to the national economy, the area should not be excluded from greater devolution of economic and political responsibility simply because our geography is based around several settlements rather than a single dominant city. Indeed the South East's economic potential illustrates that a city-led agenda could fail to maximise the benefits of devolution for UK PLC.
- 2.6 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.
- 2.7 South East leaders strongly support the consultation aim of driving forward innovative solutions that deliver better services for residents and greater democratic engagement. The Government can support them in this aim by extending the planned devolution of powers and public functions to any local authority that wishes to take them on.