

**SOUTH EAST ENGLAND COUNCILS
EXTRAORDINARY EXECUTIVE MEETING**

Date: 14 July 2010

Subject: **South East England Councils' Position on
the Future of GOSE**

Report of: Member Working Group

1. Introduction

1.1 This paper summarises the urgent action taken to ensure the views of SEEC concerning the future of GOSE were submitted to Government.

2. Why Urgent Action was Required

2.1 During the last week of June, Chris Williams (LACE Chairman) received information that an imminent announcement was expected on the future of the Government Office for the South East (GOSE) and that any views needed to be submitted to Communities and Local Government by 5 July.

2.2 To meet the deadline it was not possible to present a paper for this meeting, so Chris Williams prepared a paper for consideration by the SEEC Member Working Group which met on 2 July (see Appendix A). This paper was circulated, in advance, to all SEEC Member Councils on 30 June.

3. Working Group Discussion

3.1 Following discussion of the report, the Working Group recommended the abolition of GOSE in favour of building a stronger and more direct relationship on areas of common interest between local authorities through SEEC and central Government. This would be more in line with the coalition Government's drive for greater localism.

3.2 The Working Group also strongly believed that the co-ordination between Government and councils could be enhanced by possible civil service secondments to both share skills and better understand national and local priorities. In addition, through the allocation of a small proportion of the savings from the closure of GOSE to SEEC, a more effective co-ordination function to help both Ministers and local authorities could be developed.

- 3.3 As part of their discussion the Working Group also noted email correspondence from Hampshire CC and Swale BC, both supporting abolition of GOSE and also from Oxfordshire CC and Milton Keynes Council, expressing support for the retention of a smaller GOSE structure. Chris Williams also informed the Working Group that he had received a letter from the Public and Commercial Services Union, representing members across the Government Office network, seeking support for a continuation of a Government Office presence.

4. Working Group Outcomes

- 4.1 The Working Group requested the Chairman write to Eric Pickles as a matter of urgency, setting out the majority views discussed. This letter was sent on 5 July and a copy is attached as Appendix B for information.
- 4.2 The Executive will be advised on 14 July if any formal statement regarding the future of GOSE has been announced.

7 July 2010

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**SOUTH EAST ENGLAND COUNCILS
MEMBER WORKING GROUP**

Date: 2 July 2010

Subject: REVIEW OF THE GOVERNMENT OFFICE FOR THE SOUTH EAST
(GOSE)

From: Chairman of LACE, Chris M Williams

1. Introduction

1.1 The new Coalition Government has signalled its intention to review the system of Government Offices. It is understood that this is currently underway and a decision is imminent. SEEC has an opportunity to submit its views but the timescale precludes this matter being considered by the SEEC Executive. It is therefore suggested that the Member Working Group mandates the Chairman to submit views on behalf of SEEC.

2. Current Functions of GOSE

2.1 GOSE is one of nine Government Offices around the country. Government Offices are described as “Central Government in the regions” rather than the “regions’ voice within Government”. They provide a conduit from Central Government to local authorities and vice versa.

2.2 GOSE’s current priorities are:

- a. Delivery of the new regional governance (ie the Partnership Board) and the regional strategy.
- b. Improving local government performance and delivery
- c. Thriving inclusive, safer and cohesive communities
- d. Improving outcomes for children and young people and narrowing the gap
- e. Responding to the recession; economy, skills and employment
- f. Sustainable growth and affordable housing
- g. Low carbon living
- h. Balanced use of landscape.

2.3 However, recent decisions by the new Government have effectively removed some of these areas of activity:

- The termination of the Partnership Board
- The end of work on a regional strategy
- The abandonment of PSAs, CAA and LAAs
- The winding up of SEEDA
- The reductions in grant for cohesion.

- 2.4 Arguably the most important function that SEEC would wish GOSE to carry out - pressing for adequate investment in infrastructure to support the economic powerhouse of the country - doesn't appear in GOSE's priorities.

3. Options

- 3.1 There appear to be two broad options for SEEC:

- a. Retain a "light touch" GOSE with a focus on representing the views of South East local authorities to Central Government.
- b. Pressing for the abolition of GOSE. Central Government should have a direct relationship with local authorities or sub-regions with SEEC providing an overview if necessary.

- 3.2 The new Coalition Government has clearly signalled its intentions of a smaller state, a more permissive regime for local authorities and great emphasis on localism. The second of these options is a better fit with these intentions. There may also be some co-ordination functions that would be advantageous to both SEEC and central Govt (and which may attract a small amount of funding?) For example GOSE currently co-ordinate requests for ministerial visits/ briefings relating to the South East and act as a conduit for policy briefings/information from central Government to local authorities. Where appropriate, SEEC could take on this role in the future.

4. Recommendation

- 4.1 The Working Party is recommended to authorise the Chairman to write to the Secretary of State expressing the view that SEEC would wish to see the abolition of the Government Office for the South East and instead for Central Government to have a direct relationship with local authorities or sub-regions with SEEC providing any overview that is necessary.

Appendix B



Correspondence address:

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The Rt. Hon. Eric Pickles, MP
Secretary of State
Communities and Local Government
Eland House
Bressenden Place
London
SW1E 5DU

5th July 2010

Dear Eric,

FUTURE OF GOVERNMENT OFFICE FOR THE SOUTH EAST

As the Chairman of South East England Councils (SEEC), representing 74 local authorities, I write to share our views on the future of the Government Office for the South East (GOSE).

The overwhelming view of my councillor colleagues in the South East is that we do not need a Government Office and would prefer to build and strengthen our own relationships between SEEC, local authorities and central Government.

In view of the welcome abolition of the regime of regional targets and regional policy-making bodies, such as the Leaders' Board and SEEDA, much of GOSE's workload has been removed. We therefore see no need to continue to spend scarce resources on supporting the unnecessary scale of the bureaucracy created by the previous Government.

While some members of GOSE staff have been held in high regard by my colleagues across the South East, we now strongly support the move to greater localism and more direct responsibility for local authorities.

In putting forward this view I recognise that there will inevitably be occasions where Ministers or civil servants will not want to deal with 74 individual councils. SEEC offers a potential solution for any essential co-ordination, to the mutual advantage of Ministers and councils. There are two key ways in which central Government could support us in this co-ordination role. First is to explore potential for civil service secondments to ensure SEEC, local authorities and central Government share skills and understand each others' priorities. Second is to allocate a small percentage of the savings made by closing Government Offices to SEEC, enabling us to carry out a minimalistic but effective co-ordination function that will help both Ministers and local authorities deliver our new shared localism agenda.

I look forward to hearing you formally announce abolition of the Government Offices and hope we can explore the idea of secondments and minimal funding over the summer.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Carter', with a horizontal line underneath.

Paul Carter
Chairman, South East England Councils

SEEC Member Working Group

County Councils:

Cllr Paul Carter	Kent (Chairman)
Cllr Ian Hudspeth	Oxfordshire
Cllr Andrew Povey	Surrey (unable to attend; substitute was Cllr Tony Reid, East Sussex)

Unitary Councils:

Cllr Cec Tallack	Milton Keynes (unable to attend)
Cllr Tony Page	Reading (unable to attend; substitute was Cllr James Swindlehurst, Slough BC)
Cllr David Lee	Wokingham

District Councils:

Cllr Jeremy Kite	Dartford
Cllr David Parkinson	East Hampshire (unable to attend; substitute was Cllr Mike Appleyard, Wycombe DC)
Cllr Louise Bloom	Eastleigh
Cllr Myles Cullen	Chichester
Cllr Moira Gibson	Surrey Heath
Cllr Barry Norton	West Oxford