

**SOUTH EAST ENGLAND COUNCILS
ALL-MEMBER MEETING**

Date: 5 February 2015

Subject: **Devolution for English local government**

Report of: Heather Bolton, SEEC Director



Recommendations:

- i) Welcome Bob Neill MP to outline the case for greater devolution to English local government and the work of the Political & Constitutional Reform Select Committee.
- ii) Discuss options for further devolution to councils and the prospects for national political parties to support such proposals in the next Parliament.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Bob Neill has been Conservative MP for Bromley and Chislehurst since 2006. Originally a barrister, he spent 16 years as a London councillor and later served as a GLA member before becoming an MP. A previous CLG Minister (2010-12) and Shadow Minister (2007-10), he is now Conservative Party Vice Chairman for Local Government. He is also a member of the Political & Constitutional Reform Select Committee, involved with the committee's work on the future relationship between central and local government.

2 The devolution debate

- 2.1 SEEC has consistently called for greater funding and powers to be devolved to local authorities. Members argue this is the best way to enhance local democratic accountability and ensure that public resources are used most effectively to deliver local priorities.
- 2.2 The Scottish referendum in autumn 2014 made devolution headline news, but many in local government have been disappointed by Ministers' focus on English Votes for English Laws, rather than on options for devolving more to local authorities.
- 2.3 Mr Neill has been an advocate for greater devolution to local authorities, arguing in Parliament in December that genuine local accountability needs a move away from old-fashioned dependency on central Government grant. He has called for:
 - Councils to raise 50% of their revenue locally, for example through devolved property taxes. He believes this would give potential to cut taxes not raise them.
 - Central government to be limited to no more than 50% of public spending, with all other spending devolved.
 - 'Subsidiarity' where decisions are made as close to the public as possible.
- 2.4 Members may wish to discuss how best to continue to make the case for further devolution to influence the new Government in May 2015. For example:
 - How best to make the case for devolution in the South East, given our position as the UK's most profitable economy?
 - How to involve two tier local government in genuine devolution?
 - What are the prospects for allowing devolution of property tax to local government in the near future?
 - How would local financial devolution affect deficit reduction plans?
 - What powers should be retained by central government?
 - Would devolution be viable without a formal written agreement between local and central government?