

SEEC HIGHLIGHTS

2015-16



South East England Councils (SEEC) was established in 2009 to promote the views and interests of local government in the South East. We are a voluntary membership organisation and the vast majority of the 74 unitary, county, district and borough councils in our area are members. SEEC is the only organisation to represent all these authorities across the South East.

Influencing Government

CLG Minister Baroness Williams of Trafford addresses the SEEC Executive meeting in November



Over the past 12 months SEEC members had the opportunity to influence senior Government Ministers and decision-makers on key issues such as devolution, funding, infrastructure and housing:

- Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury Damian Hinds led a member debate on devolution
- CLG Minister Baroness Williams attended the SEEC Executive in November
- Syrian Refugee Minister Richard Harrington attended two meetings to discuss re-

settlement in the South East

- LGA Chairman Lord Porter of Spalding led member debates on business rates and housing delivery
- Outside the main meetings, SEEC leaders also met Home Secretary Theresa May and Transport Minister Robert Goodwill
- Three round tables gave South East leaders the chance to discuss growth with London Deputy Mayor Sir Edward Lister.

Devolution & funding

Devolution and funding were the focus of much of SEEC's work this year as councils across the country pursued devolution deals and pressure mounted for greater local retention of business rates.

Many South East local authorities want to access meaningful devolution, arguing it has potential to deliver more cost effective public services and boost local economies through targeted infrastructure and skills investment.

Treasury Minister Damian Hinds speaks on devolution at the SEEC AGM in June 2015



About SEEC and the South East

Much of our work involves making the case for the strategic and funding priorities for the South East and its 9 million residents. Our website www.secouncils.gov.uk has more information on SEEC and our work.

The South East has huge potential but also significant challenges. It has the UK's largest population and numbers of over 75-year-olds are expected to nearly double to 1.5m in the next 20 years, greatly increasing the demand for council services. There are also 909,000 people in income deprivation – the fourth highest total in England.

The South East – if it were a stand-alone country – would be the world's 30th largest economy. Over the 10 years to 2012 the South East paid £80bn more in taxes than it received in public spending – £6bn more than London's net contribution over the same period.

In 2015-16 the South East received England's lowest revenue settlement and grants from Government at £279 per head – £329 less than London and £214 less than the North East.

The South East needs more devolved powers and investment to ensure we continue to prosper and benefit not only local communities & businesses, but also the national economy.

SEEC is chaired by Cllr Nicolas Heslop (Conservative, Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council). Cllr Roy Perry (Conservative, Hampshire County Council) is Deputy Chairman. SEEC's work is steered by an Executive Committee made up of leaders and senior councillors from our member authorities.

SEEC continues to argue that elected mayors are unsuited to many parts of the South East and alternative models are vital to open up devolution to two-tier areas and make partnerships acceptable to local voters.

Member debate shaped SEEC's September input to the All Party Parliamentary Group for Reform, Decentralisation & Devolution, setting out 5 principles that underpin all SEEC's campaigning on devolution:

- An open, accountable approach to negotiating devolution deals
- Clarity on the criteria used to judge successful and unsuccessful bids
- Consistent devolution offers across all parts of the UK
- Linking powers with control of funding
- Long term sustainability.

Building on these principles, SEEC made the case for South East devolution to HM Treasury with its input to the Spending Review and in a small group meeting with Theresa May. On financial devolution, SEEC was one of the organisations who successfully made the case for greater business rate retention through its September submission to the Business Rates Review and other national reviews over the past two years.

The CLG Select Committee report on the Cities & Local Government Devolution Bill agreed with key points from SEEC's evidence, including SEEC's view that local areas should decide whether to have an elected mayor. "Those which want substantial devolved powers but no mayors" the report said, "should be allowed to propose an alternative model of governance."

The Select Committee endorsed SEEC's position that current legislation does not enable fiscal devolution, which it saw as "essential to genuine devolution".

Their report also acknowledged that the scale and variety of local authorities in the South East add to the time taken to agree far-reaching proposals and deadlines should take this into account.

During the year SEEC also gave members the opportunity to learn from those negotiating two devolution deals – Executive meetings saw a discussion on the progress of the Derbyshire/ Nottinghamshire D2N2 bid and feedback on the results of the Ministerial challenge process from Hampshire.

Infrastructure

The South East has England's largest growth in homes (28,360 in 2014/15). However in many areas this growth has not been matched by sufficient investment in the infrastructure needed to support it.

A particular focus this year has been on transport infrastructure as current levels of congestion reduce the quality of life for residents and increase costs for businesses, damaging competitiveness.

In January 2016 SEEC launched the [Missing Links](#) report, which details why targeted investment in the South East's transport network is so vital. It sets out 5 headline projects, which would improve national access to major South East ports/ airports and link key economic centres to unleash significant economic growth, reduce congestion and improve quality of life for millions. The report led to discussions with Transport Minister Robert Goodwill on whether sub-national transport bodies could prioritise investment, levering in support from multiple partners.

Following debate at the SEEC Executive, CLG Minister Baroness Williams confirmed that prudential borrowing against CIL or New Homes Bonus income to fund infrastructure is a local decision and encouraged areas to develop innovative ideas.

Former SEEC Deputy Chairman Cllr David Hodge, speaking in July at a national Runways UK conference on airport expansion, reinforced the case for South East councils to have a voice to ensure infrastructure is in place before planes begin to land.

Housing

LGA Chairman Lord Porter of Spalding leads the debate on housing barriers at the SEEC All-Member meeting in January



With average house prices around 11 times average earnings, affordability is a key issue for many parts of the South East. The challenge for councils is to plan and facilitate development at levels that support communities and economic growth, balancing this with environmental issues, Green Belt and protected areas and ensuring adequate funding for the supporting infrastructure required.

Discussion on tackling barriers to delivery during a 'Meet the developer' session with Barratts at the SEEC All-Member meeting in January helped inform SEEC's work on housing this year. SEEC evidence to National Planning Policy consultation, Local Plans Expert Group (LPEG), LGA Housing Commission, New Homes Bonus consultation and CLG Select Committee Inquiry into LPEG recommendations reinforced members' calls for:

- Discretionary incentives such as charging council tax or revoking planning approvals on sites with stalled permissions
- Simplicity and stability in the planning system and recognition of councils' local knowledge
- Full council control of planning fees
- Removal of the HRA cap and local control of the mix of affordable housing
- Rethinking of recent policy changes, allowing full local control of S106 and CIL payments on all sites – to ensure all developments contribute to infrastructure needs.

Working with London

SEEC has established strong relationships with the London Mayor, London Councils and East of England LGA to create opportunities for dialogue on the shared concerns of housing and strategic infrastructure. Three South East roundtables in summer 2015 led to a Wider South East Summit in December 2015. The summit endorsed creation of a Political Steering Group and agreed the priorities for political dialogue. Priorities are overcoming housing barriers to ensure each area meets its planned needs and supporting greater infrastructure investment.

Working together as the Wider South East helped ensure Treasury support for Crossrail 2. A joint letter to the National Infrastructure Commission, making the case for the project – including extensions into the South East – helped secure £80m development funding. SEEC also argued for a South East seat on the TfL Board if DfT plans go ahead giving London control over some South East rail services.

Health, care & refugees

*Syrian
Refugee
Minister
Richard
Harrington
speaks at
the SEEC
Executive
in March*



The drive to achieve integration of health and social care is a continuing priority for SEEC members. In May 2016 SEEC held a workshop for members and officers that looked at how district, unitary and county councils can all work together with the NHS to deliver a seamless, patient-centred service that maximises cost efficiency. Issues and recommendations arising from discussions at the event will be raised with Department of Health Ministers.

SEEC's response to the Local Authority Public Health Allocations consultation set out an analysis of South East underfunding and argued that any cuts to public health funding should be more heavily weighted to those councils significantly above their target allocation.

In September 2015 SEEC and the South East Strategic Partnership for Migration (SESPM) launched a film on Modern Slavery to help councils raise staff awareness, including among care workers, of the new legal duty to notify the Home Secretary about suspected victims.

Syrian Refugee Minister Richard Harrington attended a SEEC-SESPM conference on resettlement in December and then the SEEC Executive in March, where he thanked South East councils for their support in re-settling refugees. SESPM and SEEC are now working with the Home Office and CLG to co-ordinate future Syrian refugee arrivals and match them to South East local authorities' offers.

In June 2016 Richard Harrington also hosted an event for a group of SEEC members to discuss a framework for South East councils to accept transfer of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), mainly from Kent, which has 900 UASC. The need for transfers was raised by SEEC members on behalf of Kent when they met Home Secretary Theresa May and this is now included in the new Immigration Act.

Evidence & communication

SEEC's [data dashboard](#) provides an essential evidence base for SEEC's influencing work. It shows trends in the economy, housing and infrastructure, public finance, demography, migration and this year, a bespoke analysis of the new Index of Multiple Deprivation. Member discussion in 2015 shaped a new streamlined, user friendly format, which received positive feedback from members and ministers.

SEEC on-the-day briefings for members covered the Chancellor's Spending Review and Autumn Statement, the March Budget and Queen's Speech. This year SEEC also produced two briefings on the Syrian refugee resettlement programme and a briefing on the May local elections. Members also receive regular newsletters on SEEC activity – this year has seen an updated format and a move to monthly e-newsletters. In April the new, occasional Wider South East Update was also launched in the same format.

Positive media coverage of SEEC's work in national and local media helped raise the profile of member views. Coverage of business rates, Crossrail 2, Missing Links, proposals to incentivise house building, calls for a South East seat on the TfL Board and the Health and Social Care Integration Workshop ran in media including LGC, MJ, Surveyor, Public Sector Executive, LGA First and in local media.