

SOUTH EAST FIRST

The Newsletter of South East England Councils

January 2019



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News Roundup

New Asylum Support and Accommodation Contracts

The Home Office has [awarded contracts for new asylum accommodation support and advice in the South East](#). These will replace current COMPASS arrangements in September 2019. For the South East, existing accommodation provider [Clearsprings Ready Homes](#) has been awarded the contract for Initial Accommodation, Dispersal Accommodation, Transport and associated Support Services. [Migrant Help](#) has been awarded a single, national contract for Advice Issue Reporting Eligibility services. The South East Strategic Partnership for Migration will be working with SEEC member authorities to support a mobilisation and transition period as the

new contractual arrangements are rolled out.

Sir Oliver Letwin review of housing

SEEC members have written to Housing Minister Kit Malthouse [setting out four proposals for making Sir Oliver Letwin's recommendations on housing delivery work in the South East](#). The letter suggests housing diversity rules could be applied to sites of less than 1,500 homes, so that smaller sites in the South East can benefit. It also calls for local discretion on charging incentives to encourage swifter building; greater council ability to direct funding to fill construction skills gaps; and greater flexibility for councils to raise infrastructure funding.

SEEC Dates

29 March 2019 - SEEC Executive
27 June 2019 - SEEC AGM
20 September 2019 - SEEC Executive

Contacts

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Minister supports council role in shaping skills

Councils have an important role in helping colleges tailor their training to meet local labour shortages, Skills Minister Rt Hon Anne Milton has told South East England Councils members.

Meeting a group of SEEC members on 22 January, the Minister told councillors that they shouldn't wait to be asked but should be proactive in approaching colleges and schools. Local authority work to identify local skills gaps would be crucial to help colleges understand the opportunities for take up of new courses.

The Minister also advocated local authority involvement in new Skills Advisory Panels due to be established by LEPs and she supported more councillors becoming school or college governors. The role of councillors is important to maximise local accountability for decisions.

SEEC members Cllr Roy Perry, Cllr Ralph Bagge, Cllr Jeanette Clifford and Cllr James Mills met the Minister to discuss ways in which local authorities could do more to address skills shortages that risk undermining the South East economy.

They explained that, often, parts of the South East had to rely on skilled workers travelling from other areas to fill gaps in the workforce. More local authority input into shaping the training courses on offer could help ensure that local residents can learn the skills they need to fill some of those gaps.

Maintaining the South East economy is important for the whole country as South East residents and businesses pay more in taxes than the area receives in public spending. Treasury uses that income to fund projects UK-wide so if the South East contribution drops, there will be less public spending for everyone.

The meeting also covered the value of apprenticeships and examples of good practice in spending the apprenticeship levy to upskill workers. The Minister urged local authorities to be imaginative in spending their share of the levy – for example to help recruit and train staff for hard-to-fill roles in councils such as planning officers or waste management specialists.

SEEC will aim to collate existing good practice on skills from member councils to help encourage more authorities to become involved.

Wider South East Summit calls for joint voice on investment

Representatives of 100+ councils and partner bodies from South East, East of England and London have called for more joint work to secure essential investment across their areas.

A Wider South East (WSE) Summit heard that collaboration to support shared infrastructure investment needs would be important to underpin sustainable growth across all three areas, which form the dynamo of the UK economy.

The Summit – held on 11 January 2019 at City Hall, London – brought together council leaders, elected mayors, senior officers and LEP representatives to discuss how they could collaborate more closely to address strategic growth challenges.

The Summit built on ongoing debate through the WSE Political Steering Group, which brings together councillors from SEEC, East of England LGA and London Councils with the London Mayor's office.

Delegates debated with a panel of WSE leaders, including SEEC Deputy Chairman Cllr Ralph Bagge, East of England LGA Chairman Cllr David Finch, the London Mayor Sadiq Khan and Newham Mayor Rokhsana Fiaz. The session, chaired by SEEC Director Heather Bolton, discussed topics including housing, investment needs and economic prosperity.

Delegates also heard about opportunities for collaboration on barriers to housing delivery, long term transport priorities, sustainable growth and smart use of data in a second panel session. Speakers in this debate included London Deputy Mayor Jules Pipe and councillors from emerging Sub-national Transport Bodies: SEEC's Cllr Tony Page, Deputy Chairman of Transport for the South East; Cllr Kevin Bentley, Chairman of Transport East; and Mayor Dave Hodgson, Chairman of England's Economic Heartland's Strategic Transport Forum.

During round table discussions that followed the panel debates, councillors contributed ideas on how they could work collectively to address shared problems. These common challenges include meeting increasing housing demand and securing essential infrastructure investment at a time when local authorities are facing severe funding pressures.

There was support for joint work to do more to articulate the case for the national economic benefits to be gained from investing in WSE growth. The need to speak with one strategic voice across the political spectrum of the WSE was one of the key messages taken away from the Summit.

Other key discussions included scope for pooling or jointly commissioning technical research to support development plans and potential for mapping collaboration opportunities.

Further suggestions put forward initiatives on planning, economic growth, infrastructure improvements and maintaining solid underpinning evidence.

Cllr David Finch, Chairman of the East of England LGA said: "As the only three areas in the UK to make net contributions to the Treasury, the East of England, London and the South East have a combined GVA of £814 billion. Through focussing on our shared priorities, using our strong relationships, and speaking with one collective voice, we can unlock essential funding and development opportunities that are necessary to transform what is already a successful economic region into a global leader. "

Cllr Ralph Bagge, Deputy Chairman of South East England Councils said: "All our areas face similar challenges and we must all do everything we can to meet those needs sustainably – balancing homes, jobs, infrastructure and green space in a way that doesn't increase pressure on our neighbours. Working together we really need to stress the value that the Wider South East contributes to UK plc and the risk of losing that if Government focuses its investment only on regenerating other parts of the country."

The next Political Steering Group in March 2019 will consider next steps on suggestions put forward at the Summit.

This year's WSE Summit was held just before the opening of the London Plan Examination in Public (15

January 2019). Summit discussion therefore focused on joint action around shared concerns, including those set out in the emerging London Plan. The outcomes of the EiP and implementation of the Plan will remain a key issue for the Wider South East (WSE) political partnership.

London Plan Examination hearings underway

January saw the start of the London Plan Examination in Public, where a panel of three inspectors will hear views on the Plan from groups including councils, developers and voluntary sector.

South East England Councils (SEEC) is working jointly with SESL to make representations at 9 sessions. SEEC's Deputy Chairman Cllr Ralph Bagge has been lead representative at the majority of Examination in Public (EiP) sessions attended this month.

During the first three sessions, Cllr Bagge reiterated to the inspectors that SEEC and SESL member authorities have concerns about the Plan's possible implications for the South East if it increases pressure on neighbouring areas. He also called for clarification on key issues, such as the Mayor's desire to find 'willing partners for growth'. This aims to share growth with councils outside London who may have spare capacity, but the Mayor's offer about the benefits of being a 'willing partner' needs to be defined.

January's EiP sessions covered London's housing growth and implications for the Wider South East. SEEC and SESL representations have asked for clarity on how the Mayor will deliver all his housing need within London's boundaries. This is of particular concern to members, as existing high levels of South East housing growth, large amounts of protected land and other constraints – such as our infrastructure deficit – all reduce capacity to accept any further growth from London.

EiP hearings continue through to mid-May 2019, with later sessions covering economy, Green Belt and transport.

SEEC calls for greater local input on development

SEEC has challenged Government's proposals to extend Permitted Development Rights (PDR) in planning, calling for councils to retain greater control over how their areas develop.

In January SEEC [submitted its response to MHCLG's consultation on planning reform](#). Members felt that Ministers' plans to expand PDR went too far in allowing easier conversion of buildings into homes and permitting larger extensions to existing homes.

SEEC has challenged the proposals to extend PDR as this would reduce councils' control over development in their local areas. They raised concerns that relaxation of rules risks:

- Undermining councils' ability to ensure a suitable mix of uses locally that will help ensure vibrant South East town centres. Lack of council input could also lead to use of unsustainable locations for housing.
- Inappropriate home extensions that encroach on neighbours' quality of life and lead to increased complaints.
- Worsening the South East's existing infrastructure deficit as developers of PDR sites do not make financial contributions to funding local improvements.

SEEC members believe that local councils are best placed to make decisions through their current planning processes.

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