

Today's Queen's Speech outlines 26 Bills for the 2015-16 Parliamentary session in the first legislative programme set out by the Conservative Government elected on 7 May. Key Bills are proposed to support greater devolution of powers from central Government. These will be closely watched in the South East where many 2-tier or non-city areas want access to the powers already offered to devolved nations and some English cities. There will also be a range of Bills on infrastructure & development; public services; immigration & the EU; economy & taxes. In addition a range of measures will address security issues.

1. Legislation to support devolution & democracy

Cities & Local Government Devolution Bill. This would allow devolution of powers and budgets to **towns and counties** to boost local growth in England, building on local growth deals. The Bill would introduce generic powers to be applied locally by combined authorities to introduce elected mayors and streamline local authority governance. Elected mayors will be able to take over Police & Crime Commissioner functions. A separate **Buses Bill** would give combined authority elected mayors the option of running local bus services.

For the South East it is good news that the Bill includes non-city areas. However, elected mayors may be unpopular and changes to governance could be difficult to agree across boundaries and tiers.

- A **Wales Bill** gives the Welsh Assembly control over voting age and powers over energy and transport.
- A **Scotland Bill** gives tax raising and spending powers to the Scottish Parliament, including control of benefits.
- Standing Orders in the House of Commons will be altered to ensure that decisions affecting England and Wales can only be taken by MPs representing those areas.

The South East has long argued for greater devolution similar to that offered to Wales and Scotland. At 9.8m the South East has a higher population than either devolved nation and South East GVA of £203bn exceeds the combined GVA of £153bn from Wales and Scotland.

The **Votes for Life Bill** will allow British citizens living abroad a lifetime ability to vote in elections for the UK and EU Parliaments, abolishing a 15-year limit. A **Northern Ireland Bill** establishes a body to investigate historical deaths.

2. Legislation to support infrastructure & development

The **Housing Bill** extends Right-to-Buy discounts to allow housing association tenants to own their home. Councils would be required to sell high-value vacant council houses to help fund this and build more affordable homes. It also:

- Supports delivery of Starter Homes and Right-to-Build, requiring local planning authorities to help custom and self-builders registered in their area identify plots of land to build or commission their own home.
- Introduces a statutory register for brownfield land, to help achieve the target of getting Local Development Orders in place on 90% of suitable brownfield sites by 2020.
- Simplifies and speeds up neighbourhood planning to support communities that seek to meet local housing & other development needs, and introduces other changes to housing/planning legislation to support housing growth.

The SE builds the most homes in England (19,200 in 2013-14, some 1,200 more than London) to help accommodate our large and growing population. SEEC and SESL member councils have previously raised concerns about housing affordability in the SE – where an average home costs 11x average earnings – and want to ensure an increase in affordable homes. SE councils have also emphasised the importance of allowing them to drive the local planning system without unnecessary Government interference.

An **Energy Bill** establishes the Oil and Gas Authority as an independent regulator for domestic oil and gas recovery. It also devolves consenting powers for onshore wind farms from Government to local planning authorities.

The **High Speed Rail (London-West Midlands) Bill** gives Government legal powers to construct and operate phase 1 of the HS2 railway. This will include planning permission for the railway from London-West Midlands and powers to compulsorily acquire or temporarily take possession of land required.

3. Legislation affecting public services

A **Childcare Bill** wants to increase free childcare to 30 hours a week (for 38 weeks a year) for working parents of 3-4 year olds. It will also require local authorities to publish information about childcare and other services for parents, prospective parents, children and young people.

The **Education and Adoption Bill** sets out plans to:

- Strengthen Government intervention powers in failing or underperforming 'coasting' maintained schools, including speeding up turning schools into academies.
- Powers for Government to direct councils to have their adoption functions carried out by another council or agency, enabling creation of regional adoption agencies. Functions could include the recruitment, assessment and approval of prospective adopters; decisions about matching a child to adopters; and adoption support services.

Together these changes to education, childcare and adoption could have a significant impact on the South East's 1.6m under-14s.

Health & social care was mentioned in the speech but does not currently require additional legislation as Government will implement the NHS's five-year plan. This includes increasing the health budget, integrating health and social care, and ensuring the NHS works 7 days a week. *Adequate funding and effective integration of care and health services is vital in the South East, with England's largest ageing population, growing to over 1.5m aged 75+ by 2037.*

The **Enterprise Bill** includes measures on public sector pay-offs and business rates as well as changes to cut red tape for businesses. The Bill sets out a proposed cap on exit payments for the best paid public sector workers. It will also reform business rate appeals and allow the Valuation Office Agency to share information with local government to improve the system. In addition, a new Small Business Conciliation Service will handle business disputes without the need for court action.

A **Trade Unions Bill** aims to reform unions and protect public services against strikes. There will be minimum thresholds for turnout in strike votes. In addition, for public services such as health, education, fire and transport at least 40% of those entitled to vote must support industrial action.

A **Draft Public Service Ombudsman Bill** will create an overarching Public Service Ombudsman, reporting direct to Parliament. This would improve the final tier of redress for customers not satisfied by how their complaint has been handled. It would include functions of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, the Local Government Ombudsman and potentially the Housing Ombudsman. Government consultation on the proposal closes on 16 June.

4. Legislation on immigration & the EU

The **European Union Referendum Bill** will enable a referendum on UK membership of the EU before the end of 2017. A separate **EU Finance Bill** sets out the terms on which the UK will fund the current EU budget.

An **Immigration Bill** aims to prosecute people working in the UK illegally, including powers to remove their wages. There will be a new body to combat labour exploitation. In addition the Bill includes:

- New powers for councils to clamp down on unscrupulous landlords and evict people in the UK illegally.
- All recruitment must include adverts in the UK. Consultation on using visa fees to fund apprenticeships.
- The right to deport first and appeal later will apply to all immigration appeals and judicial reviews. Foreign criminals awaiting deportation will be tagged.

The South East has high levels of immigration, with a net figure of 16,200 arrivals in 2013. This is the second highest level after London, with overseas workers attracted by our strong jobs market.

5. Legislation on economy & taxes

A **Full Employment & Welfare Bill** will freeze most working age benefits for 2 years from 2016-17. Exemptions include pensions, disability costs, maternity, paternity and adoption payments. In addition:

- The benefits cap for non-working families will be cut to £23,000 a year.
- A new Youth Allowance will have work conditions attached and 18-21 year olds will lose automatic entitlement to housing benefit.
- Regular reports will be provided on progress towards full employment, apprenticeship creation and the Troubled Families programme.

In the South East these changes are likely to affect over 90,000 residents. The area currently has 74,000 people aged over 25 claiming unemployment benefit (higher than the number in the North East or East Midlands). There are also 17,000 young unemployed aged below 25 across the South East.

A **National Insurance Contributions/ Finance Bill** will prevent increases in the current rates of income tax, VAT and National Insurance. Legislation is also planned to increase personal tax-free allowances to match the equivalent of working 30 hours a week on the minimum wage.

In the South East the increased personal allowance is expected to benefit some 4.2 million employed people.

6. Other measures

The Queen's Speech highlights the Government's desire to introduce a British Bill of Rights but no specific legislation is put forward at this stage. A number of Bills deal with policing and armed forces issues:

- An **Extremism Bill** is planned to combat groups and individuals who reject British values and promote hate. It will include a new power for councils and police to close down premises used to support extremism. Other measures include new powers for the Home Secretary to issue banning orders, for the police to use extremism disruption orders, greater measures against broadcasting of extremist content and enabling employers to check for staff with extremist links.
- The **Investigatory Powers Bill** will allow police and intelligence services access to communications to target terrorism and serious crime.
- A **Policing & Criminal Justice Bill** aims to introduce changes to the police complaints system and internal police disciplinary procedures and extends the powers of HM Inspector of Constabulary. It also proposes changes to the use of bail and use of custody powers for under-17s and those with mental health problems. Further measures will be announced to enshrine a Victims' Code in primary legislation.
- An **Armed Forces Bill** will deal with simplifying the way service personnel are charged for offences. A full strategic defence and security review will also be carried out in 2015.
- The **Psychoactive Substances Bill** sets out plans to make it an offence to produce, supply, possess or import psychoactive substances (also known as legal highs). The Bill would also allow civil sanctions by police and local authorities to lead a proportionate local response where appropriate.
- A **Charities Bill** will allow charities to make social investments and extend criteria for automatically disqualifying trustees to help prevent abuse. It also plans to strengthen Charity Commission powers.
- A **Bank of England Bill** will strengthen governance and accountability at the Bank of England.