

Agenda Item 12

SOUTH EAST ENGLAND REGIONAL ASSEMBLY EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Date: 9 June 2000

Subject: **LGA Regional Hearings**

Report of: Director

Recommendation

This report is for the Committee's information.

1. Background

1.1 Members of the Committee will recall that earlier this year the Local Government Association held a number of regional hearings' in order to:

examine the implications of current and future development in regional government and administration for the future of local government in England "

1.2 The report of the hearings, which were chaired by Lord Dearing, has now been published, and the Executive Summary is appended herewith.

2. Considerations

2.1 Not surprisingly, the LGA hearings showed that there exists a wide range of views on how the regional agenda might or should develop over both the short and long term. In any event, it is felt that change one way or another is inevitable after the next General Election. The main conclusions from the hearings are therefore about how local government should act in order both to maximise its influence within those developments, and to minimise the prospects of changes which diminish the role of democratic local authorities.

2.2 The LGA panel agreed on the need for **greater devolution** of government functions and powers to the lowest effective level. Subsidiarity means that decisions taken as close as is appropriate to the issue –whether regionally or locally –are likely to be better decisions. It follows that the development of regional governance should involve devolving powers from central government rather than removing them from local government. The report

remarks particularly on the issues of Whitehall departmentalism that the recent Cabinet Office report 'Reaching Out' seeks to address, the perceived lack of regional accountability of key services such as Health, and the limits on the discretion of RDAs to spend across programme budgets.

- 2.3 The need for **flexibility** of approach in developing the regional agenda is another key conclusion. The varying appetite across England for regional working should be accommodated in future proposals, and these must also be capable of recognising established sub-regional and cross-boundary arrangements. Indeed a continued dissatisfaction with current regional boundaries runs through much of the findings.
- 2.4 Finally, **transparency** is seen as vital for public acceptance of regional structures, in parallel with revitalised local democracy. The web of regional structures and working is already complex and the locus of players in those structures is sometimes uncertain.

Paul Bevan
Director

23 May 2000

Note: Copies of the full report, 'Regional Variations: report of the regions', are available, price £10 to local authorities and not-for-profit organisations, from IdeA Publication Sales - 020 7296 6600.