



**Government Response to the
Communities and Local
Government Committee's Report
on the Future of
Regional Government**

11th May 2007



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Presented to Parliament by
the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government
by Command of Her Majesty
11th May 2007

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1 INTRODUCTION

1. The House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee published its Report *Is there a future for Regional Government?* on 14 March 2007.
2. As the introduction to its Report explains, the Committee refined its original terms of reference in order to focus on two questions –
 - How does the current system of regional governance actually work?
 - What role would city-regions play in the future development of regional policy?
3. The Government welcomes the Committee's recommendations on these questions and responds to them below, grouping them together where appropriate.
4. The Government response is made in the context of the ongoing joint review of sub-national economic development and regeneration (the "Sub National Review", or SNR). As the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Budget statement on 21 March explained, this is aimed at
 - strengthening local authority incentives and decision making powers to improve economic outcomes and tackle concentrations of deprivation, following the analysis in the Lyons Inquiry
 - developing mechanisms to drive sub-regional collaboration across functional economic areas, including city regions, building on the Local Government White Paper, and considering the case for devolving individual powers and functions
 - improving the economic planning and decision-making processes at the regional level, including through better alignment of regional strategies, enhancing the strategic role of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), improving RDA capacity, efficiency and effectiveness and increasing regional accountability
 - ensuring clearer objectives for regeneration and renewal at national, regional, local and neighbourhood levels, with sharper incentives for improving performance, clearer accountability and more effective coordination, and a stronger link to wider economic strategies
 - strengthening the interface between the public and private sectors to maximise the effectiveness of investment. The review will take account of the recommendations of the *Leitch Review of Skills and Employment*.
5. The Government will ensure the Committee's views feed into both the SNR's conclusions and the outcomes of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR 07) to be published in the autumn. The Government is grateful for the Report, and for the valuable contribution it makes towards developing policy on how further to release the economic potential of English regions.

2 BACKGROUND

6. The Government's written evidence to the Committee, submitted by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on 23 January 2006, set out the context and the case – economic, strategic and pragmatic – for a regional approach. This is helpfully summarised in paragraph 11 of the Report. The Local Government White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities* published on 26 October 2006 explained in Chapter 4 ('Strong cities, strategic regions') how the dynamism of our revived cities could be harnessed to this approach through strengthened leadership and improved cross-boundary working.

7. The Government recognises that, to maximise cities' contribution to regional and national economic performance, it needs to help them exert influence over the key market drivers operating at their spatial level, including their travel to work areas. The analysis in HM Treasury's document *Devolving decision-making 3: Meeting the regional economic challenge – The importance of cities to regional growth*, the independent *State of the English Cities* report and other recent research on city and city-region economies all point to the development of mechanisms to drive sub-regional collaboration across functional economic areas as a potential reform.

8. For the past 18 months the Government has therefore engaged in a dialogue on these questions with local authorities and their stakeholders in the eight English Core Cities; and with groups of smaller and medium-sized cities and towns. Each of the Core Cities has developed a business case setting out how it could work better – through strengthened collaboration across administrative boundaries and with some additional devolution of powers from central government.

9. During March 2007 Communities and Local Government Ministers met a number of city-region partnerships to discuss progress in taking forward their business case proposals. Although the Committee's Report expresses reservations on this score, Ministers were pleased to hear the partnerships confirm that both support for the city-region agenda and the impetus for strategic cross boundary collaboration to drive improved economic performance remain strong.

10. In parallel, the Government is working with a number of local authorities to develop Multi Area Agreements which will give them greater flexibility over funding as they work with partners to deliver sub-regional outcomes. This emphasis on economic success underpins Communities and Local Government's wider drive to create prosperous and cohesive communities, offering a safe, healthy and sustainable environment for all.

11. The Government's January 2006 written evidence also set out the changing role of the Government Offices for the Regions (GOs), noting in particular the then-ongoing review which would see them moving to a more strategic, place-based policy role. The *Review of Government Offices* was published in March 2006, and implementation completed by the end of March 2007.

3 RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS

THE GOVERNMENT OFFICES FOR THE REGIONS

Recommendation 1

Public accountability, and confidence in the Government Offices, would be increased if more of the communications between Government Offices and central government upon the direction of policy could be placed in the public domain and thus open to scrutiny. We urge the Government and the GOs to consider how progress in this direction might be achieved, with a view to implementing changes by December 2007. (Paragraph 28)

Response

12. The Government accepts the need for public accountability and confidence. Government Offices recognise they need to ensure the public understand their role, and continually work to strengthen relationships and improve communications with stakeholders. Integral to their work with local and regional partners is encouraging and facilitating dialogue between localities and central policy Departments.

13. Nevertheless, Government Offices are not independent institutions. As “central government in the regions” they are responsible for implementing Government policies that affect local areas. They therefore operate under the same Freedom of Information regime as the rest of the Civil Service – aiming to be as open as possible but respecting the limitations Parliament has placed on the disclosure of policy advice. The Government believes this is the right balance.

THE CENTRE AND THE REGIONS

Recommendation 2

There is an urgent need for central Government to take responsibility for streamlining and co-ordinating its own requirements of the Government Offices. It is neither sensible nor reasonable for each Government department to continue to press its own agenda on the Government Offices without regard to the requirements of others, and without consideration of the GOs’ own strategic agenda. We look to DCLG’s Ministerial team to provide the necessary leadership in Whitehall to ensure a more coherent, joined-up approach to the mandates of the Government Offices. The range of PSA-related targets being implemented by the Government Offices should also be reviewed in order to ensure that resources are being directed effectively to deliver the most important outcomes. (Paragraph 39)

Recommendation 3

There is a clear lack of strategic oversight of the requirements and messages issuing from Whitehall in respect of the Government Offices. The regional co-ordination unit should, through Ministers, have the authority to initiate review of Departmental requirements where they are in conflict with, or diverge from, the framework set out for the Government Offices in the recent review. (Paragraph 43)

Recommendation 4

The regional co-ordination unit should be integrated into the main DCLG estate. (Paragraph 44)

Response

14. The Government recognises and agrees with the Committee about the value of a joined-up approach. The March 2006 *Review of Government Offices* proposed that the centre should collectively agree a smaller number of outcomes with the Government Office Network. The ten Departments concerned have since negotiated a Tasking Framework setting out high level objectives to both enable better prioritisation and ensure resource allocations are closely and transparently aligned to cross-government priorities. It will be published this summer.

15. The Tasking Framework will be revised following publication of CSR 07 to take account of any new and revised Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets and to continue to ensure outcomes are delivered in the most joined-up way. The aim is to have a three year Framework covering 2008-2011 in place from April 2008.

16. Developing the Framework was not simply a one way conversation. The Regional Coordination Unit (RCU) and GO Regional Directors challenged Departments to ensure their requirements were in keeping with GOs' refined strategic, place-based role; and an interdepartmental steering group of senior officials, chaired by RCU, ensures ongoing multilateral discussions with the Network.

17. The GO Network regularly reviews its accommodation arrangements to ensure they meet its business needs and represent value for money to the taxpayer; and the Government can confirm in response to the Committee's Recommendation 4 that the RCU will move into Communities and Local Government's principal HQ building by the end of 2007.

Performance of the RDAs

Recommendation 5

(See response at para 26 below)

Sustainable development

Recommendation 6

Environmental sustainability is critical and without it economic and social progress will be impossible. It is too soon to tell if the Government's approach to regional action on sustainable development will lead to positive, measurable outcomes. As a starting point, the Government should ensure that the requirements it has set for the regional institutions in *Securing the regions' futures* (which we have summarised in paragraph 62) are fully met. It should also take further steps to encourage and disseminate best practice in sustainability appraisal, and to ensure that lines of accountability for performance against sustainable development targets and actions are clear. (Paragraph 65)

Response

18. The Government agrees with the Committee that environmental sustainability is a key element of economic and social progress, and confirms it is working with GOs, RDAs and Regional Assemblies to ensure the recommendations in *Securing the Regions' Futures* are implemented and progress effectively measured.

19. As the Report notes, each of the regional institutions has a mechanism in place to report on its delivery of sustainable development

- Government Offices have a formal performance management framework
- RDAs' statutory purposes include contributing to sustainable development, and the 2005 guidance on Regional Economic Strategies requires that these be based on the UK Sustainable Development Strategy. The current Tasking Framework under which RDAs operate includes a Sustainable Development PSA target
- *Securing the Regions' Futures* made clear the role of the Regional Assemblies – including delivery of the Regional Spatial Strategy, which itself has a statutory sustainable development requirement.

20. The Government will later this year publish further guidance for regional bodies on good practice in delivering sustainable development.

Regional Funding Allocations

Recommendation 7

We welcome the Government's initiative in developing the Regional Funding Allocations exercise. Although the success of the exercise in influencing Government expenditure has yet to be proved, we note that the trial was widely supported and support the calls both for the exercise to be repeated, and for the second trial to include allocations for skills and for rail expenditure. Once the relevant allocations have been agreed the Government should publish its decisions together with the advice submitted by the regions, so that the effectiveness of the process can be properly assessed. (Paragraph 71)

Response

21. The Government welcomes the Committee's endorsement of the Regional Funding Allocations (RFA) process. It believes the exercise did indeed significantly enhance the influence of regional stakeholders over long term public spending decisions. For example, the fact that the Department for Transport's (DfT) July 2006 responses largely accepted each region's advice provides concrete evidence of the exercise's impact. Preparations for a second RFA transport round are already underway.

22. The widespread level of agreement on housing, planning, transport and economic priorities secured between regional and local partners also ensured they were able to make significant, focussed contributions – building on their RFA evidence – to the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review.

23. In their formal responses to the regions in August 2006 Communities and Local Government, DfT, Department for Trade and Industry and HM Treasury Ministers undertook to consider extending the scope of the Regional Funding Allocations exercise to other expenditure streams as part of the wider discussions in the Sub National Review. The outcome of these discussions will be announced as part of CSR 07.

The Regional Assemblies

Recommendation 5

The Government should take account of strong local concerns about the poor transparency and accountability of the Regional Development Agencies and should take steps to improve both. Accountability would be greatly assisted if the Government clarified that the Regional Assemblies had the right to scrutinise fully the expenditure budgets of the RDAs. (Paragraph 55)

Recommendation 8

There is scope for the Government to enhance the effectiveness of the Assemblies in serving the regional public interest through their scrutiny work, while also increasing public understanding of, and confidence in, the existing system. (Paragraph 92)

Recommendation 9

While the Assemblies have successfully secured effective collaborative relationships with the RDAs we are concerned that the lack of formal scrutiny powers available to the Assemblies could be a barrier to their work if these constructive relationships break down. (Paragraph 93)

Recommendation 10

Although it has proved very valuable for the Assembly/RDA relationships to have been established through consensus and co-operation, we believe that the subsequent addition of formal powers would give the Assemblies a firmer foundation for their work. The fact that such powers have been provided for the Greater London Assembly, together with the current Government proposal to give local authority scrutiny committees powers to require information from the Regional Development Agencies, adds strength to this argument. (Paragraph 93)

Recommendation 11

We recommend that the Regional Assemblies be given equivalent scrutiny powers to those held by local authority scrutiny panels, to compel the appearance of witnesses and the production of papers. We look to the Government to consult on the provision of such powers within the next twelve months. (Paragraph 94)

Recommendation 12

We believe that it would be advantageous for the Assemblies and RDAs to agree and publish a joint statement setting out the basic principles of regional assembly scrutiny and common elements of procedure, such as the agreement between each Assembly and RDA on the timing of a formal response to recommendations. (Paragraph 95)

Response

24. The Regional Development Agencies Act 1998 empowers the Secretary of State to designate a representative body with whom RDAs should consult on the exercise of their functions. As representatives of their regions, Assemblies have been so designated.

25. But to ensure this process works in practice, the Government believes the quality of the partnership between the two bodies is vital. The Regional Funding Allocations exercise clearly showed the positive working relationships that have developed between RDAs and Regional Assemblies; and the eight Assemblies and RDAs outside London have recently agreed a Memorandum of Understanding outlining the key principles for effective scrutiny without the need for formal powers. The memorandum text is attached as an Annex to this response.

26. The Sub National Review is also looking at ways to continue developing regional accountability. The Government, however, believes it is important not to confuse scrutiny with either the day-to-day management and expenditure responsibilities of RDA Boards and their Chief Executives or with wider parliamentary accountability.

Scrutiny at Westminster

Recommendation 13

We accept the argument that, given the existence and increasing importance of regional governance structures in determining policy, there should be more thorough and consistent scrutiny of the regions at Westminster. We are pleased that Ministers also expressed their willingness for such scrutiny to take place. (Paragraph 112)

Recommendation 14

We believe that the most effective way of securing such scrutiny would be to appoint a select committee for each region, which might meet a limited number of times each year (perhaps in conjunction with the relevant Assembly) in order to examine the work of key regional bodies and to call Ministers to account for their performance. We can also see merit in the suggestion of additional regional debates or question times in Westminster Hall. (Paragraph 113)

Recommendation 15

Consideration of changes in the way the House of Commons operates is formally a matter for the select committees on Procedure and Modernisation of the House of Commons; and, ultimately, for the House itself. We shall write to these Committees upon publication of this Report, asking them if they will examine the effectiveness of the current Regional Affairs Committee and the detailed implications of improved Parliamentary scrutiny for the regions. We hope that Ministers will continue to support any proposals for scrutiny reform at Westminster which might arise as a consequence of such inquiries. (Paragraph 114)

Response

27. The Government understands that the Chair of the Committee wrote on 24 March to the Leader of the House of Commons (responsible for the Modernisation Committee) and to the Chairman of the Procedure Committee asking that they consider “looking further at the evidence we have taken and... exploring its implications”. The Government welcomes this and agrees it is a matter for the House itself, perhaps best considered once the overall outcomes of the SNR and CSR 07 are clear.

Public Service Agreement 2

Recommendation 16

We welcome the Government’s commitment to strengthen the evidence base for measurement of regional economic performance. (Paragraph 120)

Response

28. The Government believes the key to monitoring achievement of the PSA 2 target is to capture as wide a range of economic activities occurring within the

regions as possible. Gross Value Added (GVA) per head is the measure which best does this – and thus the best available to assess the overall economic performance of each region. Improved GVA accuracy is therefore the best way to improve measurement of PSA 2.

29. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is responsible for quality assuring the input data used to estimate regional GVA. Since March 2007 it has had staff stationed in the regions (generally co-located with the RDA) to help improve its knowledge of day-to-day regional economic activity and thereby increase the robustness of regional GVA figures disaggregated from national data. Work is also underway to produce by December 2009 a ‘real’ regional GVA series which will enable comparisons to take into account differences in price levels between regions.

30. Further consideration will be given to the Committee’s remarks on measurement of the PSA 2 target in the context of the review of all such targets across Government in advance of the Comprehensive Spending Review announcements later in 2007.

City-regions

Recommendation 17

Our consideration of the arguments in favour of city-regions leads us to agree with the Minister that the economic case for city-regions is the most compelling. Further, we believe that the role which could be played by city-regions as drivers of economic growth can be achieved without the need for wholesale re-organisation of existing administrative structures, which would be both costly and slow. (Paragraph 145)

Recommendation 18

The Government’s stance on the development of city-regions might be described as encouraging and permissive: the success of this approach is illustrated by the number of submissions which we received from authorities in developing city-regions outside the ‘Core Cities’; these included Stoke-on-Trent, Carlisle, and Hull and the Humber Ports (one of the eight city-regions linked by the Northern Way). However, this encouragement has yet to be matched by the specification of powers or resources which will enable city-regions to act corporately in new and more effective ways. (Paragraph 158)

Recommendation 19

The Government needs to be much more explicit about where, and in what circumstances, it considers the development of city-regions would be valuable and about how the boundaries of city-regions are to be determined. (Paragraph 159)

Recommendation 20

(See response at para 36 below)

Recommendation 21

The lack of clear detail in the Local Government White Paper on the future development of city-regions was disappointing. While the Government's determination to allow governance models to evolve from the 'bottom up' is, in one sense, laudable, it has failed either to set clear parameters for, or to express a specific vision of, what is achievable within the constraints of national policy and available resources. This failure is impeding realisation of the policy. Unless further statements clarifying the potential for, and limits on, city-regions are made soon, the city-region movement will again lose momentum.

(Paragraph 170)

Recommendation 22

The Government has stated clearly on a number of occasions that, in its view, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to sub-regional governance will not work. The emerging city-regions policy is an attempt to tailor arrangements to meet specific sub-regional requirements. Having got this far, however, it is essential that the Government should give real assurances to those for whom a city-regional style of governance is inappropriate that the development of the policy will not result in a reduction of support for other areas. (Paragraph 179)

Recommendation 23

The Government now needs to determine how the specific powers, resources and governance structures of each city-region can be best designed whilst avoiding undermining the capacity of the Regional Development Agencies to support and promote prosperity in surrounding areas. (Paragraph 184)

Recommendation 24

We would encourage the Government to commit itself to a clear city-regions policy, indicating the extent of city-region feasibility, and the powers and resources which will be made available, so that this alternative to regional governance can be properly explored. (Paragraph 188)

Response

31. The Government is committed to encouraging and supporting the development of robust and effective city-regions and welcomes the Committee's endorsement of the underlying economic argument. The Sub National Review is specifically looking at how the Government can better empower cities and regions in a way that provides clear accountability for decisions; stronger leadership and incentives to support growth; reduced inequalities; and effective governance arrangements.

32. The Government is also committed to maintaining the impetus from local authority partners for city-region collaboration. The city-region business cases were of their nature uniquely tailored to each individual city – reflecting the considered economic ‘footprint’ of the city-region. Developing city-regions has therefore, rightly, been a bottom-up process reflecting different local geographies, priorities and circumstances. There is no ‘one size fits all’ solution.

33. That said, the Government recognises the need to specify the powers and resources that will be made available. The Government’s consultation on City Development Companies finished on 7 March, and reform of Passenger Transport Authorities in our big cities is being taken forward through the forthcoming draft Road Transport Bill.

34. The SNR will consider this further in conjunction with economic development and physical regeneration activity at other sub-regional levels – taking into account the impact on the capacity and priorities of the RDAs.

35. The Government understands the Committee’s concerns about those places beyond city-regions, but believes there is no reason for them to be left behind. Sub-regions with distinct qualities and attributes can make a compelling case for partnership in pursuit of sub-regional economic growth across a functional economic area. Indeed, the Government has engaged with a number of smaller cities and towns that are developing business cases for sub-regional collaboration. Increased economic growth within a city-region could also have positive “spill-over” for adjacent places.

Recommendation 20

While accountability should be a fundamental part of any new governance arrangements, any formal requirement for city-regions to be governed by directly elected mayors would require enacting legislation, which can take years to achieve. For this reason, we welcome the softening of the Government’s stance on directly elected mayors and its new willingness to build on existing governance arrangements. (Paragraph 167)

36. The Government welcomes the Committee’s observation. The White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities* endorsed locally agreed approaches to sub-regional working, while making it clear its principled view that ‘the greater the powers being devolved, the greater the premium on clear, transparent and accountable leadership’.

Annex to Government Response

SCRUTINY: RDA/RA MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

1 Purpose of Memorandum of Understanding

This is a Memorandum of Understanding between Regional Assemblies (RAs) and Regional Development Agencies¹ (RDAs). It outlines key principles to enable effective regional scrutiny.

2 Status of the Memorandum

This Memorandum sets a high level national framework and reference for regional protocols. The Memorandum is endorsed by the Regional Assemblies, Regional Development Agencies, their sponsoring Departments and Government Offices for the regions.

3 Statutory Context for Scrutiny

As public bodies, RDAs are accountable at a national level to Government and Parliament. In addition, each RDA is regionally accountable through the Regional Assembly. The Regional Development Agencies Act 1998 requires RDAs to have regard to any views expressed by the (Chamber) Assembly.

Section 8 of the Act outlines that RDAs are required “to have regard, in the exercise of its functions under section 7(1) (a),² to any views expressed by the Chamber³” and to “consult the chamber in relation to the exercise of such of its functions.”

4 The Key Principles of the Scrutiny Role

The Memorandum endorses four key principles for Scrutiny. It will be –

- (i) timely, planned and programmed;
- (ii) endorsed by partners;
- (iii) provide measurable and meaningful outcomes; and
- (iv) add value for both the RDAs and RAs from a regional perspective.

The key principles that underpin the scrutiny role should be the same in the eight English regions. However, each region has developed its own distinctive procedures for taking forward scrutiny. This reflects the different opportunities and challenges facing each region. It is important that scrutiny complements other audit, evaluation and monitoring frameworks, including the National Audit Office’s programme of Independent Performance Assessment of RDAs.

¹ The Memorandum applies to the eight Regional Development Agencies and Regional Assemblies outside London. Different arrangements apply to the London Development Agency and the London Assembly.

² Section 7(1)(a) provides for RDAs to formulate and keep under review the Regional Economic Strategy.

³ Ministerial agreement was given in 2005 for ‘Chambers’ to adopt the term ‘Assembly’.

5 Effective Scrutiny

The purpose of scrutiny is to enable RAs, RDAs and other regional partners to examine the impact of activities and investments designed to promote economic development and the strategic catalyst role played by the RDA in delivering against the priorities set out in the Regional Economic Strategy.

RAs and RDAs have agreed that effective scrutiny should –

- Strengthen shared understanding of the issues;
- Reflect the Regional Assembly role as a critical friend;
- Be the product of real dialogue between RAs, RDAs and regional partners;
- Be relevant and timely;
- Have a sound evidence base;
- Have measurable outcomes which demonstrate added value for the region; and,
- Have a procedure in place for monitoring the implementation of findings that emerge from the scrutiny process.

Scrutiny forms part of the working relationship between the Regional Assembly and Regional Development Agency.

6 Test of Effective Scrutiny

RAs and RDAs recognise that the test of effective scrutiny will be how it has added value to sustainable regional development.

The added value should take the form of –

- Contributing to the development of strong regional partnerships;
- Building strong consensus and a joint understanding of regional issues through collaborative working;
- Where differences are identified finding resolutions that meet the region's needs;
- Producing outcomes enabling the region to 'do things better' in the future;
- The process itself allowing other sub-regional/local partners to contribute to regional scrutiny;
- Demonstrating the growing maturity of the regional institutions in delivering real change for the region.

Individual regional scrutiny protocols are a useful tool in identifying and agreeing how scrutiny will best work to meet the region's specific dynamics.

Annex A

SCRUTINY – GOOD PRACTICE GUIDELINES

This is not intended to be prescriptive – but draws out the processes demonstrated in the examples of best practice

- 1 *The Regional Assembly, following discussions with Members, the RDA and other regional bodies, propose topics for the scrutiny cycle which are endorsed by relevant partners.*
- 2 *Scrutiny topics should be thematic, timely and strategic with outcomes focused on task and finish actions.*
- 3 *Regional Assemblies should have an established scrutiny procedure wherein expertise, experience and knowledge can be added for specific topics.*
- 4 *Scrutiny should be underpinned by a sound evidence base which is shared with partners in advance of hearings where appropriate.*
- 5 *A Member with a prejudicial interest in the scrutiny subject will disclose this and take appropriate action to protect the scrutiny process.*
- 6 *Each region is encouraged to develop its own protocol which sets out the regional approach to scrutiny. This will aid public understanding of how scrutiny works in that region and how its effectiveness is reviewed.*
- 7 *Examples of good practice are available on line from the English Regions Network (www.ern.gov.uk).*



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