



SOUTH-EAST REGIONAL AUTHORITY
Údarás Réigiúnach an Oir-Dheiscirt

Response to the

**European Union
White Paper on
*Governance***

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South-East Regional Authority
1 Gladstone Street,
Clonmel,
Co. Tipperary,
Rep. Of Ireland.
Tel 00353 52 26200
Fax 00353 52 26512
[http:// www.sera.ie](http://www.sera.ie)
email: dir@sera.ie

Director – Mr Thomas Byrne
European Officer – Mr. Michael Moroney
Research & Policy Officer – Mr. Terry O'Brien
Administrative Assistant – Ms. Angela Sheehan

- **Prelude**

The South-East Regional Authority (SERA) strongly welcomes the publication by the European Commission of the White Paper on European Governance. The Authority also welcomes the opportunity to make a positive contribution to the wider debate and consultation process on Governance within the European Union. The Authority considers that the publication of the White Paper is timely, particularly, in view of the failure of the Nice Treaty in Ireland last year. It is opportune, because it is a response to growing concern about a lack of confidence in the institutions and workings of the EU. The contents of the White Paper are a recognition that the structures of governance within the EU are top-heavy and remote from the public. In addition, enlargement and the imminent accession of new member states have created a new and necessary impetus to look at the whole area of governance. The South-East Regional Authority also recognises that the White Paper and consultation phase are not a panacea, rather the first steps in a greater process of connection and interaction with the citizens of the whole European Union. SERA considers that the debate on governance should stimulate public debate in a constructive and ultimately, positive way.

- **The Response**

The South-East Regional Authority broadly welcomes the Commission's White Paper and wishes to make the following points. It is in the context of the Regional Authority being a statutory regional body with a wide and general remit that this submission is made. The emphasis therefore, will be primarily, but not exclusively, a regional one.

SERA supports governance based on the principles, as outlined, of ~

Openness – the importance of open and transparent processes' of decision-making and communication. This should also involve more simplified and accessible language, aiding understanding of complex issues and structures

Participation – It is vital that the whole democratic process is participative and inclusive at all tiers. Improving participation should stimulate interest and confidence.

Accountability – The public perception of the EU not being accountable or lacking in clearly defined roles is one that must be addressed. There is a need for clear explanations of the various roles and decisions. This will give much needed credibility and legitimacy to the process.

Effectiveness – EU policy should be delivered at the most appropriate levels, re-enforcing the principle of **subsidiarity**. In order to be effective, policy should be proportionate, based on well defined and understood objectives and proofed for past experiences and possible future impacts.

Coherence – This is particularly important in view of the increasingly diverse nature of the union, culturally, politically and socially and in view of the fact that many of the activities of the union are cross-sectoral. Coherence demands more consistency and understanding and can only result in better governance across all spheres of government.

In addition to these principles of good European governance, SERA would ask that the following more specific actions be considered. These points are made under the first two of the Commissions' proposals, as they are of most relevance – Better Involvement and More Openness and Policies, Regulation & Delivery ~

- SERA welcomes the proposal in the White Paper to establish more systematic dialogue and stronger interaction with regional and local authorities and agencies. The establishment of an Irish Regions Office in Brussels, (as currently proposed by the eight regional authorities and two regional assemblies in Ireland) to directly represent and inform the regions and their interests would go along way towards meeting this proposal. This office would regularly report back and maintain a direct communications link with the EU on all the major issues.

- Increase the role of the Committee of the Regions (CoR) in the EU institutional framework. The CoR can play a meaningful and important role. Increased involvement would result in more comprehensive representation (always sought by the Irish delegation to the CoR), consultation, and fuller participation. The CoR role should be more proactive in terms of examining policy and preparation of reports on Commission proposals.
- The EU should also consider, in tandem with Member States, granting some legislative powers to the regions. This would result in better and appropriate implementation of the subsidiarity principle, and bring the EU closer to the citizens.
- Direct elections for Commissioners and the Commission President would increase legitimacy and increase understanding of their respective roles.
- SERA would also suggest that the EU attempt to become more human through increased promotion and sponsorship of cultural events, television and radio programmes, twinning arrangements, community-base competitions, improved presence on school curricula at primary and secondary levels. All of the aforementioned would stimulate interest and understanding and would enable young citizens in particular to gain insight into what the EU does.
- Promote governance as a process of partnership, co-operation and networks, moving away from levels and hierarchies. This approach would give further democratic legitimacy and would include civil society. This approach has worked in many individual countries and is more inclusive and consensual.
- SERA considers that there is real scope for development and integration through opening relations and dialogue with pre-accession countries and those in Central and Eastern Europe. Governance will affect future and current members equally.
- Promote the transfer of knowledge and dissemination of best practice through staff exchanges, workshops, public seminars, secondments and training.

- Consider re-drawing the geographic boundaries for the purposes of European elections along NUTS III boundaries or a combination thereof. This makes practical sense and would give citizens a more direct and meaningful sense of representation as well as making those elected more accountable.

- The importance of better and more appropriate information and communication channels, and techniques for the purposes of delivery and understanding cannot be understated. This information should be delivered locally and regionally, in a way clearly understood by the all citizens. Information should be timely, up-to-date and less complex. As an adjunct to this, SERA welcomes the proposal to introduce expert advice and guidelines, on all complex issues, particularly scientific knowledge, to enable informed debate and understanding amongst the public. Access to documentation, feedback and information should be made available through all stages of decision-making.

- SERA broadly welcomes the initiatives set out in the paper for increased actions for improving contact with the people through local and regional authorities, through, as stated earlier, a more enhanced role for the CoR, through greater and more direct dialogue with regional actors, and through looking at the possibilities for more flexible implementation of EU legislation at regional level. SERA would argue, however, that this cannot be done without 'buy-in' from both central and local government.

- Further and increased formal and informal dialogue between representatives of regional government, central government and the commission, through attendance at meetings, input into agenda, information sessions etc.

- The proposal to simplify policies and regulation, and the red-tape that goes hand in hand, is something that SERA holds as both necessary and practical. Again, the Regional Authority would argue that central governments (member states) should adopt the same approach when implementing EU directives / policies.

- Improving and increasing the role of regional and local authorities will strengthen the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

With regard to *Global Governance*, the South-East Regional Authority is in general agreement, that in terms of globalisation, the EU should attempt to apply the principles of good governance to their global responsibilities and should attempt to speak with one voice. This is not to detract from the multiplicity and diversity of the member states, rather to promote coherence and more effectiveness in international relations.

The South-East Regional Authority broadly welcomes the White Papers' commitments regarding *Refocused Policies and Institutions*. This is necessary in terms of long-term strategic objectives and long-term policy coherence. SERA welcomes all stakeholders from all spheres of government activity working together on overall strategy and policy. SERA considers that more active roles in the promotion of the Union are best placed at local and regional level, where citizens are closest to the elected representatives.

In conclusion, SERA considers that NUTS III Authorities are ideally and uniquely placed to act as conduits and enablers between the local citizen and the Commission, through their locally nominated members, and through their expertise, established track record and partnerships with local and transnational agencies.