Commission staff working paper:  
"Ongoing and systematic dialogue with local government associations"

Position of the Local Government Association (England & Wales)  
and the Local Government International Bureau

The European Commission has recently issued a consultative document on dialogue with associations of local government as part of its follow up to the White Paper on Governance. At the time of the White Paper, the Commission supported the LGA/LGIB proposal that it establish a “systematic dialogue with European and national associations of local and regional government at an early stage in the process”. This commitment was incorporated into the White Paper.

What is emerging is a partial step in this direction, and we welcome the expression of confidence implied by the working paper in the Committee of the Regions (CoR). But as the paper focuses on set piece annual conferences mediated by the CoR, an EU body, it fails to address the need for a dynamic and continuing technical intercourse between Commission desk officers and local government practitioners.

In summary, our reaction is very positive but with some important reservations as to the implementation:

- We welcome the initiative and share the Commission’s analysis of the issue: how to organise an effective dialogue with 100,000 local authorities and 250 regions who collectively and individually are responsible for the delivery (and financing) of much EU policy and law.

- We welcome the proposal for an annual meeting at political level to debate the Commission’s work programme. Such a political debate would appear to fall properly within the remit of the CoR to facilitate. As a minimum the CoR should be asked to ensure the involvement of the principal European associations of sub Member State government (CEMR, AER, CPMR & Eurocities).

- We likewise welcome the possibility of annual meetings with individual DGs, to be organised on the same basis.

- We understand that individual DGs are experimenting with different forms of consultation, notably DG Environment which has links with the EPRO network, comprising one region per Member State. We welcome the development of informal sounding boards such as this, but consider that such networks are not accountable to elected local government bodies, nor are they representative of the true diversity of local and regional government, and therefore should not be seen as an alternative to formal consultative mechanisms with CoR and with the representative associations.

- Most importantly, the static annual debate at political level envisaged by the paper is not a substitute for a dynamic ongoing technical exchange, giving expert practitioners opportunity to interact with Commission desk officers in the early stages of preparing a proposal. In this respect it is necessary to distinguish the respective roles of CoR and the representative European and national associations, as recognised by the CoR itself in the recent opinion by Lord Tope (November 2002), and by President Sir Albert Bore in a letter to President Prodi (24.7.2002).

- The Staff Working Paper focuses on Green and White Papers. These are important. But possibly more important are individual legislative proposals which have significant implications for local
authorities in terms of implementation, possibly bearing heavy financial and administrative consequences. We therefore regret the limited scope of the dialogue as envisaged in this paper.

A fuller involvement of all spheres of governance involved in delivering EU policies and legislation is a positive and necessary contribution towards European integration and in bolstering the democratic legitimacy of the Union. Moreover, early consultation of these legitimate interests will identify and possibly resolve potential problems at an early stage and thereby facilitate more effective decisions and implementation of EU policy and legislation. It could be argued that a proper consultation of local authority interests on the so called fridges Directive might have exposed the practical problems of implementation (in the UK at least) rather earlier than was the case.

What was envisaged at the time of adoption of the White Paper, and is still envisaged by the associations, is a technical dialogue between Commission desk officers and genuine experts/practitioners from local government, nominated by local government itself, and participating in exchanges during policy formulation and the drafting phase of legislative proposals. Such discussions would complement annual political debates of the type proposed in the staff working paper.

It is recognised that this dialogue is already happening in an ad hoc manner, particularly where an enlightened desk officer or more senior fonctionnaire has recognised the contribution that local government plays to the successful delivery of their draft proposal. Quite properly, this involvement in Commission working groups is normally facilitated by one of the pan-European associations mentioned above.

What we advocate is a more systematic and therefore guaranteed dialogue between the Commission and the European and national associations, on a dynamic and ongoing basis, to complement any political debates facilitated by the Committee of the Regions.

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The Local Government Association (LGA) represents the local authorities of England and Wales – a total of just under 500 authorities. There are 34 county councils, 36 metropolitan district councils, 47 English unitary authorities, 33 London authorities, 238 shire district councils and 22 Welsh unitary authorities. http://www.lga.gov.uk

The Local Government International Bureau (LGIB) acts principally as the European and international arm of the Local Government Association for England and Wales (LGA). It also represents the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA). The LGIB provides the UK secretariat for the Committee of the Regions and some other European and international bodies. http://www.lgib.gov.uk