

London Councils

The voice of London local government

The Queen's Speech 2016: briefing

Overview

The Queen's Speech contained details of 20 new Bills, one levy, one draft Bill and three carried over from the last session that the Government will seek to progress this parliamentary year. This briefing highlights the bills that affect London local government.

The Queen's Speech sets out the Government's agenda for the second legislative year of its term. We look forward to working with London MPs, Peers of all parties and the APPG for London on the nine Bills below (in alphabetical order) that we believe will affect London's boroughs. Our analysis is based on the limited information about the Bills as published immediately after the speech. As more information and the full Bills are published, we will analyse them and issue further detailed briefings as necessary.

Children and Social Work Bill

The purpose of this Bill is to break down the barriers to adoption, improve social work standards and the opportunities of young people in care. It includes measures to develop a new 'Care Leavers' Covenant' underpinned by a statutory duty for local authorities to publish a 'local offer' outlining the services and standards of treatment care leavers are entitled to. The duty also extends to local authorities and schools promoting the educational achievement for adopted children and those in long-term care. The Bill will introduce standards for local authorities to act as a 'corporate parent' to children in care, as well as an extension of the right to a Personal Adviser for looked after children up to the age of 25. A more demanding professional standard for social work will be introduced as well as a specialist regulator for the profession.

There is no more serious a responsibility than making sure London's most vulnerable children all have the chance to succeed in life. Councils work tirelessly as corporate parents and recognise the need to work continuously to make sure children from the care system are offered every opportunity to fulfil their potential. We look forward to seeing more details of the proposals announced today and will engage fully in a discussion with government to make sure plans which come forward support the important work undertaken by councils across London. It is welcome to see that the Government's announcement today is a reflection of the best of what many councils already do. However, we are concerned that there appears to be no recognition at all of the financial context in which children's services operate, where budgets are under continuous pressure and the demand for services is growing. Funding must be an equal consideration to taking these proposals forward.

Counter-Extremism and Safeguarding Bill

The Counter-Extremism and Safeguarding Bill in many respects is the government's boldest step into the counter extremist space. The legislative changes and direction of policy reflect the increasing importance placed by the government on community engagement and multiagency work at a local level to tackle terrorism and extremism. Improved oversight within unregulated education settings is a welcome development.

The counter measures set out in this Bill directly threaten local authority sovereignty with increased scrutiny from the centre and strengthened powers to intervene where boroughs are seen to be failing to respond adequately to the threat of extremism. The proposed consultation must listen carefully to local authorities when setting powers to intervene locally, taking into account the excellent work happening across the London boroughs in tackling the threat posed by extremism. The government must recognise the unique challenges we face in London and work with us to find the means to build on the successes of our tolerant, multi-racial, multi-faith communities. Critically, it is paramount that local government has both the funding and means to be fully involved in executing the new measures outlined in this Bill.

Digital Economy Bill

Under this Bill all residents and business will be legally entitled to have a fast broadband connection installed. A number of other measures are aimed at strengthening the hand of the consumer, for example requiring providers to release data on customer complaints and broadband speeds so that people can make better informed choices. The bill would make it easier to switch digital providers by making it the responsibility of the companies to coordinate the switching process on behalf of the customer. Another strand of the bill focuses on the sharing and use of publically-held data in order to improve services and combat fraud. The Bill will also bring in 'new and simpler' planning rules for building broadband infrastructure.

London Councils welcomes the ambition in this Bill. We support the legal right to a fast broadband connection, not least as currently certain areas of London are poorly served in terms of digital connection. We also support the proposed powers for public authorities to share information to combat public sector fraud. We will want to see the detail on the provisions regarding the new planning rules for building broadband infrastructure.

Education for all Bill

The Bill is designed to raise standards in schools by providing a consistent approach to education regardless of location, prior attainment or background. It also confirms the government's commitment to 'fundamental reforms' to the National Funding Formula (NFF) to ensure all schools are funded fairly. The Bill reaffirms plans to convert into academies schools in underperforming local authority areas, and the proposed legislation will make it easier for schools to become academies. The Bill will shift the responsibility for school improvement from local authorities to head teachers. Schools will also be accountable for supporting the education options of excluded pupils. The substantive issues in the Bill will largely apply to English schools only.

London Councils welcomes the government's commitment to improving the education of young people. However, London's experience has shown that an effective partnership between boroughs, parents, teachers and central government is the best way of helping schools to achieve high standards, rather than structural changes. It is still unclear how the changes to the NFF will affect London's schools but we are calling for government to level up funding levels to ensure no child is disadvantaged by the introduction of a new funding formula.

Higher Education and Research Bill

The government's intention in this Bill is to encourage choice and competition in the higher education sector. This would make it easier to set up new universities creating more choice in the market. A new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) will be produced alongside the Bill with the aim to raise teaching standards and ensure value for money. The Bill will give students more information about applications, offers, progression rates and diversity - and aims to encourage a widening of participation and social mobility - especially for students with disadvantaged backgrounds.

London Councils welcomes the government's objectives for Higher Education institutions widen participation, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, it is paramount that any changes to higher education are focused on ensuring a greater delivery of skills to better support future economic and labour market needs. It will also be important to see if there is a longer term impact of linking fees to a TEF that could negatively affect levels of HE entry for the disadvantaged.

Local Growth and Jobs Bill

The purpose of this bill is to grow the economy by giving councils greater incentives to support business and develop their local economy. Main benefits of the Bill would be allowing local authorities collectively to retain 100 per cent of their business rates; and strengthening councils' powers to cut business rates for local firms if they wish. These changes will be piloted in London where the Government has previously announced the desire to explore options for early implementation ahead of the wider roll out of the new system. The Bill also gives combined authority mayors the ability to levy a business rate supplement to fund infrastructure projects. This is described as "similar" - but not in addition - to the existing agreement to fund Crossrail 1, and it therefore remains unclear whether any new power to raise supplementary rates is envisaged for London.

London Councils broadly welcomes these measures and believes that fiscal devolution offers London - and the rest of the country - a great opportunity to create a finance system that helps councils achieve sustainable economic growth. Retaining more of the rates we collect also creates the opportunity for Government to devolve responsibility and control of a wider range of public services. However, full devolution of business rates also means local authorities bearing 100 per cent of the risk of recession. Broader flexibilities than those proposed may be necessary effectively to manage that risk - including the power to raise supplementary rates, and to determine thresholds, reliefs and discounts for business ratepayers. The new arrangements will need to balance local flexibility, rewards, needs and financial risk. In welcoming the reform, London Councils recognises that there is still a lot of further work and clarification required and will continue to work with Government to create a genuinely devolved approach to business rates retention.

Modern Transport Bill

This Bill will seek to encourage investment in autonomous vehicles and hopes to put the UK at the forefront of safe technology in the autonomous vehicles industry.

These measures, over the medium-term, could have a significant impact on the way that Council's manage London's roads and traffic. If the UK is to be at the forefront, then London and the boroughs will be right in the front rank providing the skills, research and investment and test sites for these modern transport systems and technologies. Note that there is already an existing autonomous vehicle trial in Greenwich.

Neighbourhood Planning and Infrastructure Bill

The aim of this Bill is to change the way major projects are planned with the aim of ensuring that Britain has the infrastructure needed to build one million new homes and allow businesses to grow. The Bill will introduce legislation which restricts the use of pre-commencement planning conditions, the role of neighbourhood planning will be strengthened, and the compulsory purchase order process will be reformed with the aim of making it 'clearer, fairer and faster' for all involved. The Bill will also enable privatisation of the land registry and establish the National Infrastructure Commission on a statutory basis.

London Councils welcomes the government's intentions to simplify the compulsory purchase order process. It is currently complex and expensive, but with changes it could facilitate increased development on suitable land. Any changes to planning conditions, however, will need to be monitored closely as these are an important and necessary part of the planning process. The government must be careful to avoid alterations that lead to inappropriate developments that could blight London's communities. The much anticipated provision to legislate for a statutory duty on councils to prevent homelessness is not mentioned in the briefing issued today.

Prison and Courts Reform Bill

Measures in this Bill drive the education, healthcare and security for prisoners and modernise the courts and tribunals service. This involves the creation of Reform Prisons led by governors who are able to enter into contracts and establish their own Boards with external expertise. In addition, Prisons will also be required to produce statistics on prisoner education, reoffending and employment on release. Currently 47 per cent of prisoners have no formal qualifications at all on entry to prison and 13 per cent report never having had a job.

London Councils welcome measures that can help the education and the reintegration into society of offenders. We would like to see measures included that would include increased use of alternatives to custody which is properly funded and in partnership with boroughs.

Carry-over Bills

High Speed Rail (London-West Midlands) Bill

This hybrid Bill will provide the Government with the power to construct phase one of HS2 and enable the Government to compulsorily acquire or temporarily take possession of land required for the scheme. First presented in Parliament in 2013, this Bill will continue to its legislative process, having received a carry-over motion from the previous parliament. Carry-over enables the Bill to be resumed without starting the process again from scratch. The Bill has finished its progress in the Commons and has now moved to the Lords where it will start its committee stage this week.

Policing and Crime Bill

This Bill seeks to continue the reform of policing. Provisions within the Bill include emergency services collaboration, police complaints, firearms, mental health and police custody, and alcohol licencing. A key focus of the Bill is to enable directly elected Police and Crime Commissioners to take over the governance from Fire and Rescue Authorities, where a local case is made, with the intention of facilitating greater collaboration between emergency services and maximising efficiencies.

The Bill, unlike elsewhere in the country, will bring fire and rescue services in London under the direct responsibility of the Mayor of London by abolishing LFEPA (London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority). It transfers LFEPA functions to the London Fire Commissioner, to be appointed by the Mayor; providing for the appointment of a Deputy Mayor for Fire; and requiring the London Assembly to appoint a committee to carry out a range of functions on its behalf. London Councils will continue to support the development of shared governance arrangements between the Mayor of London and London local government in relation to emergency service collaboration.

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London Councils represents all 32 London boroughs and the City of London. The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime and the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority are also in membership