

NEWS RELEASE
Local Government Information Unit

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Power to the regions

Local democracy think tank the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) today launched *Regions that work*, a report arguing for extensive powers for the new regional assemblies that may be created in parts of England after referendums this autumn.

The report is published jointly with the Campaign for the English Regions (CFER). It is a contribution by supporters of regional devolution to the hearings that are going on in the three northern regions for which elected assemblies are proposed initially. In July, the Government is due to publish the draft bill containing revised plans on the powers of the proposed assemblies.

Regions that work describes the specific roles that regional assemblies could play. It argues that their functions should include:

- Dealing with planning and spatial strategies
- Allocating housing capital investment
- Transport powers over roads and public transport, including rail
- Economic development, job creation and business support
- Determining the regional skills strategy and leading its implementation, including the funding of adult learning
- Rural issues such as agricultural support programmes, land management and forestry

Regions that work also argues that the new regional assemblies should have a general power of competence to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of their region. They should have a duty to promote public health, sustainability and equal opportunities. To help ensure their accountability to voters, regional assemblies should have their own direct tax raising powers. This should include the power to issue bonds to raise capital. Regions should also have a role in the distribution of lottery funds.

Jo Dungey, LGIU Policy Officer, said: "Regional assemblies could play a vital and dynamic role in tackling longstanding regional inequalities, contribute to a more effective regional policy and promote joined up government and the well-being of their communities. However, regional government will only work if it brings power down from Whitehall, and from unelected quangos, in order to make a material difference to local communities on issues such as housing, transport and jobs.

"Regional assemblies must strengthen local democracy, bring decision making closer to the ground and be a force for cutting through red tape. People will vote for regional government if it makes practical improvements and if it is not just a talking shop.

"We welcome the debate launched by the Deputy Prime Minister on the regions and hope that the Government will give regional assemblies the coherent set of powers and responsibilities that creates regions that work."

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Notes to Editors

1. Originally founded in 1983 to campaign against the ratecapping regime that was established in the 1984 Rates Act, the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) is Britain's foremost independent local democracy think tank, campaigning to extend local authority best practice, freedoms and responsibilities. The LGIU is working to influence the debate on local government modernisation. The LGIU and its sister organisations The Education Network (TEN) and the Democratic Health Network (DHN) provide research, policy briefings, information, advice, training and lobbying services to local authority and trade union affiliates. Previous LGIU news releases and statements can be viewed at www.lgiu.gov.uk.

2. The Government White Paper Your Region, Your Choice in May 2002 set out the powers proposed for regional government. In July, the Government is committed to publishing a draft bill setting out the powers that the regional assemblies will be given. The Government is then expected to hold referendums in the three northern regions of the North East, North West, Yorkshire and Humberside later in the autumn of 2004.

3. Regions that work can be downloaded from <http://www.documents.lgiu.gov.uk/Regions.pdf>.

4. There is a joint LGIU/ CFER launch event for Regions that work on Monday 29 March at the Danum Hotel, High Street, Doncaster. It commences at 12.30pm and there will be a roundtable discussion chaired by Peter Hetherington of The Guardian. For further information, contact Don Price on 0191 245 0825, 07932 767814 or don.price@cfer.org.uk.