

**Devolution to Hampshire 'would be good for firms'**

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By Andrew Ross

THE chairman of the Solent Local Enterprise Panel believes devolving extra power away from Westminster to Hampshire and the Isle of Wight would be good for [business](http://dailyecho.co.uk/business).

However, speaking to the Echo at the LEP annual Growth Conference in [Southampton](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/search/?search=Southampton&topic_id=7090), Gary Jeffries, pictured below, warned: “It’s important for businesses to have a strong voice.”

Solent LEP, formed after the government offered local areas the opportunity to take control of their future economic development, would have a seat on a new Combined Authority along with the leaders of councils and the national parks within the two counties

“The LEP has devolved responsibility already and it’s shown that having business people involved in the decision making process can have a positive impact,” said Gary.

He pointed to £45 million which the LEP had spent in the region during 2015, including £20 million on skills provision – including major improvements to [Eastleigh](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/district/eastleigh/) College and the foundation of the Isle of Wight Centre of Excellence for Composites, Advanced Manufacturing and Marine Technology.

LEP had given £7 million in funding to support business start-ups and help established businesses expanding. This investment has also saved or created 1,200 jobs in the region, he said.

If 'Devo South' was given the go-ahead – a decision from government is expected shortly – the new combined authority would be able to keep income from business rates, currently sent to London, which would be about £750 million – roughly equal to the grants councils receive from Westminster, which would be withdrawn.

The government has said it will not allow a devolved region to increase business rates – unless they have an elected mayor, and then by only two per cent.

“The whole business rates situation needs a close look,” commented Gary, who did not see why a devolved area should have to have an elected mayor to earn greater control of its finances.

“Businesses want to see an authority that would be flexible and agile, not a complex additional tier to local government.”

Looking ahead to the LEP’s work in 2016, he said that it would be bidding strongly for a share of £4 billion of government cash through its Growth Deal.

Gary said he wanted to use the money on “transformative” projects such as the [Royal Pier](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/search/?search=Royal+Pier&topic_id=1163) development in Southampton which improved an area’s infrastructure, brought housing and created jobs.

He said they were currently considering more than 40 projects in their future plan and there were some difficult choices ahead.

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