
Minutes of the meeting of the Central Area Growth Board held on Thursday 19 October 2023 at 10:00

Present: Councillor Marland (Milton Keynes City Council) (Chair)
Councillors Nunn (West Northamptonshire Council), Smithers (North Northamptonshire Council), Weir (Bedford Borough Council) and Zerny (Central Bedfordshire Council)

Apologies: Councillor Simmons (Luton Borough Council)

Also Present: C Austin (Director of Environment - BBC), G Candler (Chief Executive – NNC), L Carver (Director Place and Communities - CBC), H Chipping (Chief Executive - SEMLEP), V Hloumuka (Head of Economic Growth and Inward Investment - WNC), P Horrocks (Chair - SEMLEP), S Lloyd (Head of Economic Development MKCC), P Thomas (Director of Planning and Placemaking – MKCC) and R Tidman (Committee Services Manager)

CGB8 Welcome and Introductions

Councillor Marland welcomed attendees to the meeting.

CGB9 Minutes

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Central Area Growth Board held on 2 August 2023 be approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

CGB10 Disclosures of Interest

For the purpose of transparency Councillor Nunn advised that West Northamptonshire Council had been recommended to be the host local authority to take on all LEP functions, including strategic economic planning and business representation on or before 1 April 2024.

CGB11 Update on the Future of Regional Working and the Local Enterprise Partnership

The Head of Economic Development (MKCC) introduced the report noting that an Expression of Interest process had been run regarding the future of the LEP functions. The SEMLEP Board had met and agreed that West Northamptonshire Council would be the host local authority for the LEP functions.

The Chief Executive of SEMLEP noted that as well as agreeing the host authority, the SEMLEP Board had also discussed the governance arrangements and the importance of the involvement of businesses.

The Chair noted that the Leaders wanted time to consider what the future business functions might be and how the new arrangements might interact with businesses and therefore suggested the third resolution be amended to reflect that the report in December would consider future plans for business engagement.

Councillor Nunn noted that now that the decision had been made it was key that all of the Leaders met to focus on the structure and approach to engaging with businesses, the role of businesses and the wider skills agenda. All of the local authorities in the area needed a clear view of what activities were undertaken by SEMLEP and how we would want to continue these going forward. It was proposed that the Chief Executive of SEMLEP circulate a note to Leaders in advance of a workshop which would itemise the various activities of SEMLEP as well as giving an indication of their outputs. Leaders would then be invited to consider what they wanted to continue or whether there was anything that they would suggest doing differently. The Chief Executive of SEMLEP was also asked to produce a list of assets of the LEP, including any reserves and funding pots so that there was an oversight of those funds and an understanding of any that were ringfenced.

The Chair of the SEMLEP Board welcomed the clarity to move forward and acknowledged that this change addressed issues that had been highlighted around a lack of democratic accountability. The new arrangements meant that the practical employment issues could start to be addressed with the current delivery team. It was further noted that the way businesses engaged with the new arrangements in that the more businesses were involved in supporting and advising the new arrangements it was considered the better that delivery would be. It was suggested that while the decision making would be political, the involvement of businesses was critical for private sector delivery and to create confidence in the business sector of the new arrangements.

RESOLVED:

1. That subject to its agreement at SEMLEP board on 18 October 2023, that the Central Area Growth Board formally endorse the recommendation that West Northamptonshire Council should be the host local authority to take on all LEP functions, including strategic economic planning and business representation on or before 1 April 2024.
2. That an update is provided to the 12 December 2023 meeting of the Central Area Growth Board on progress of detailed implementation process for future of LEP functions.
3. That an update is shared on future plans for business engagement to ensure that a strong, independent and diverse local business voice is embedded in the future arrangements at the meeting on 12 December 2023

CGB12 Future Branding of the Central Area / South East Midlands

The Chair noted that the report considered the naming and branding of the Central Area Growth Board and of those functions that were currently delivered by SEMLEP that would transfer to West Northamptonshire Council. The report proposed that in the short term that the SEMLEP functions would continue to be delivered under the South East Midlands

banner and that the Board members agree to set aside funding to commission external branding experts to advise on both the future branding of the Growth Board and the transferred LEP functions.

Councillor Smithers noted that he did not wish to continue using the South East Midlands brand and that the Board should look to enlist branding experts to consider what would be the most appropriate brand for the area.

The Chair advised that the priority was what the current services provided by the Growth Hub and the Skills Hub were called in the short term and it was noted that there was recognition in the industry to the existing branding and it also provided a fall back in case any new branding was not ready for the 1 April 2024.

RESOLVED:

That the Central Area Growth Board agree to use existing Central Area funding to commission external branding experts to advise on both the future branding of the Growth Board, and the future of LEP services.

CGB13 Future of the Central Area Growth Board

The Chair noted that it was proposed to hold an 'away day' for Leaders and Chief Executives on the future of the Growth Board and to consider a number of matters such as the branding, Terms of Reference, common approach to devolution, the future of services currently delivered by SEMLEP and how best to engage with businesses.

It was noted that SEMLEP had been established for twelve years so it was overdue to have honest conversations about future arrangements as there had been many changes since then which meant that this was an opportunity for things to be done differently.

The Chief Executive of SEMLEP noted that they had communicated to their team that the Growth Hub, Skills Hub and some of the core functions had been agreed to be transferred to West Northamptonshire Council and so some level of assurance could now be provided although discussions as to the transfer of staff now needed to be taken. It was further noted the offer of expertise from officers at other local authorities to support SEMLEP with the transfer of functions and management of HR issues.

The Chair noted that in terms of next steps it would be helpful if the Chief Executive of SEMLEP produced a comprehensive list of functions the LEP currently undertakes so that the Leaders could agree what should continue, what could be done differently and what should cease. It was also requested that a framework be provided of how the current officers fitted with these functions and a schedule of where decision points were and potential options might be.

RESOLVED:

1. To action an 'away day' for Leaders and CX's on the future of the Growth Board to look at:
 - a) Strategic aims and Terms of Reference of the Central Area Growth Board;
 - b) Branding of the Central Area/South East Midlands;

- c) Building a common picture of ambitions for any Devolution discussions for the area; and
 - d) Considering the future of services formerly delivered by SEMLEP provided, including future arrangements to involve the voice of business.
2. To bring an update to the December meeting of the Central Area Growth Board on discussions regarding the future of the Central Area growth board.