

CENTRAL AREA GROWTH BOARD

When: Thursday 19 October 2023 at 10:00

**Where: Suite 1.02, Civic, 1 Saxon Gate East, Milton Keynes,
MK9 3EJ**

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Members of the Central Area Growth Board

Councillor Marland (Chair)

Councillors Councillor Nunn (Vice-Chair), Councillor Simmons, Councillor Smithers,
Councillor Weir and Councillor Zerny

Enquiries

Please contact Peter Brown on 01908 253671 or peter.brown@milton-keynes.gov.uk

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Agenda

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Agenda

1. **Welcome and Introductions**

The Chair to welcome members of the Committee, officers, any external witnesses, and the public to the meeting and introduce committee members, officers and witnesses who are present.

2. **Minutes** **(Pages 5 - 8)**

To approve, and the Chair to sign as a correct record, the Minutes of the meeting of the Central Area Growth Board held on 2 August 2023.

3. **Disclosures of Interest**

Councillors to declare any disclosable pecuniary interests, other registerable interests, or non-registerable interests (including other pecuniary interests) they may have in the business to be transacted, and officers to declare any interests they may have in any contract to be considered.

4. **Update on the Future of Regional Working and the Local Enterprise Partnership** **(Pages 9 - 12)**

To consider a report on the future of regional working and the Local Economic Partnership.

5. **Future Branding of the Central Area / South East Midlands** **(Pages 13 - 16)**

To consider a report on the future branding of the Central Area / South East Midlands.

6. **Future of the Central Area Growth Board** **(Pages 17 - 18)**

To consider a report on the future of the Central Area Growth Board.

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Minutes of the meeting of the Central Area Growth Board held on Wednesday 2 August 2023 at 10:00

Present: Councillor Marland (Milton Keynes City Council) (Chair)
Councillors Baker (Central Bedfordshire Council), Nunn (West Northamptonshire Council) and Smithers (North Northamptonshire Council).

Apologies: Councillors H Simmons (Luton Borough Council), Weir (Bedford Borough Council) and Zerny (Central Bedfordshire Council) (substituted by Councillor Baker).

Also Present: M Bracey (Milton Keynes City Council), M Coiffait (Central Bedfordshire Council), L Church (Bedford Borough Council), H Chipping (SEMLEP), G McCleave (Luton Borough Council), L Seymour (West Northamptonshire Council), S Lloyd (Milton Keynes City Council), R Tidman (Committee Services Manager) and Councillor D Hopkins and three members of the public.

CGB1 Welcome and Introductions

Councillor Marland welcomed attendees to the meeting noting that there had been political changes since the election in May which meant that there were two new members of the Board, Councillor Weir on behalf of Bedford Borough Council and Councillor Zerny on behalf of Central Bedfordshire Council.

CGB2 Minutes

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Central Area Growth Board held on 14 February 2023 be approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

CGB3 Disclosures of Interest

None received.

CGB4 Election of Chair and Co-Chair

Councillor Nunn proposed and Councillor Smithers seconded that Councillor Marland be appointed Chair of the Central Area Growth Board for the Council Year 2023-24.

Councillor Marland proposed and Councillor Baker seconded that Councillor Nunn be appointed Co-Chair of the Central Area Growth Board for the Council Year 2023-24.

The appointments were agreed by acclamation.

RESOLVED:

1. That Councillor Marland be elected Chair of the Central Area Growth Board for 2023-24
2. That Councillor Nunn be elected Co-Chair of the Central Area Growth Board for 2023-24

CGB5 Committee Matters 2023-24

The Head of Economic Development (MKCC) introduced the report noting that there were a number of issues that the Growth Board needed to consider for the year ahead. These included: the membership of the Growth Board; a suggestion to rename the Board; and nomination of representatives to regional bodies.

During the discussion on this item it was noted that:

- a) The South East Midlands name had a certain recognition outside the area that the authorities represent and that defining the Board as the 'Central Area' did not establish the group as a coherent economic geography in its own right. There were also a number of economic benefits to identifying as part of the South East Midlands brand.
- b) It was noted that the work of SEMLEP meant that this was a recognised name with valuable branding.
- c) An alternative view was put forward that changing the name was too much like cashing in on the SEMLEP brand and that a business case needed to be carried out to develop a compelling case before the Board should consider a change of name.

RESOLVED:

1. That members appointed by each Local Authority on the Central Area Growth Board as set out in the report be noted.
2. That Central Area Growth Board representatives on regional bodies, as set out in the report be agreed, and further nominations for vacancies also be agreed.
3. That officers be asked to prepare a business case for a change of name of the Board which should include compelling evidence as to why the Board should change its name to the South East Midlands Authorities.

CGB6 Future of regional working and the Local Enterprise Partnership

The Head of Economic Development (MKCC) introduced the report noting that regional economic working was likely to be a key area of interest for all authorities within the South East Midlands area. It was important to understand that the government had indicated that it was minded to wind up LEP's and transfer the functions to local democratic institutions but as no further guidance had been issued there was uncertainty as to how this would work. A task and finish group had been established to advise the SEMLEP Board of options.

Prior to the meeting, the Board received letters from the Milton Keynes, Northamptonshire and Bedford Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Small Business and from the Milton Keynes Business Partnership and these had been published online with the papers for the meeting. The Chair highlighted that for the most part the requests in the letters were not a matter for the Board but for SEMLEP to consider and so they would be shared with the task and finish group.

The Chair noted that SEMLEP had built up a reputation particularly around the Growth Hub and Careers Hub and that there was a view that these were working well so why would there be any need to change or reinvent how they operated. Going forward there were three clear options. The LEP Board could continue in some form as it currently was without core funding from government (local authorities or private sector would have to fund it). Services could be transferred to the Local Authorities which would allow for some continuation particularly for staff and services. The final option would be to cease the services and for each authority to choose to deliver these individually or as a combined service across two or more authorities. The second option was preferred but it was ultimately for the SEMLEP Board to decide its future. It was also important that business leaders were consulted appropriately about the changes with hopefully an improvement in how the business sector was engaged.

Concern was expressed about the uncertainty about the government's intentions and any further delays to being able to make progress on this matter. It was important that all six councils were able to 'express their interest' as to delivering services in the future.

It was recognised that the LEP was an entity in its own right and the decision as to what happened to it when the government ceases funding of it was down to the LEP to decide. The Board was being asked to consider what they would prefer the outcome to be which the LEP would be advised of as part of their decision making.

There was a view expressed that this could be an opportunity for these services to be delivered at a local rather than a pan-regional approach which would allow funding and decisions to happen at a much more local level. However, it was noted that if funding was split to individual authorities the same level of service that was currently provided by the Growth or Careers Hub may not be able to be delivered. It was a case of seeing what funding was provided by government and then what was better delivered at a local or regional level.

The Chief Executive of SEMLEP provided the Board with details around the current funding arrangements.

The Chair outlined that it was incumbent on this board to set out what they thought regional working looked like in the short to medium term. The area currently had no devolution deal and the authorities are fairly new to regional working. There was a lot of value to the work that SEMLEP had done in terms of building partners into a coherent economic geography.

It was noted the group needed to look forward and put the area on the map with a strong driven plan that gets the attention of people, businesses and government.

Officers outlined the current situation with devolution which was as previously indicated that the government seemed only interested in pursuing Level 3 devolution deals (directly elected mayor of a combined authority). members reiterated that there was no interest in pursuing a Level 3 deal and that officers should write to the Secretary of State to restate our interest to initiate no-obligation discussions on a Level 2 deal.

RESOLVED:

1. That Leaders formally confirm as a collective that the Growth Board's position is for the LEP to close on 31 March 2024 following the government's 'minded to' announcement to stop distributing core funding to Local Enterprise Partnerships.
2. That Leaders formally endorse through the Growth Board the approach that an Expression of Interest process (if current funding is made available by government) for the services outlined in the report, is run with Local Authority partners as soon as practical.
3. That the Central Area (Local Authorities) view outlined in this note is formally sent to the Task and Finish group to form the basis of a more detailed paper advising the SEMLEP board on future options.
4. That Leaders provide any guidance on thinking regarding the 'core' SEMLEP work as outlined in the report to advise officers on development of options for these services.
5. That the Chair and Co-Chair offered to meet business representatives in the event that the LEP agreed with the Boards direction of travel, to discuss the future of business engagement.
6. That a letter to the Secretary of State is to be written and agreed offline asking for a start to Level 2 devolution deal on a non committal basis from all partners.

CGB7 Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting was due to be the 19 October, however it was noted that this date may need to be amended as the LEP Board would meet on the 13 September and depending on the outcome of that the Board may need to meet earlier than scheduled.

Central Area Growth Board Report

19 October 2023

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

Report author **Sophie Lloyd**
Head of Economic Development, Milton Keynes City Council

1. Recommendations

- 1.1 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.
- 1.2 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.
- 1.3 That an update is shared on future plans for a Business Board to ensure that a strong, independent and diverse local business voice is embedded in the future arrangements at the meeting on 12 December 2023.

2. Background

- 2.1 For the 2 August 2023 Growth Board meeting, officers prepared a paper on the future of Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) services. During that meeting Leaders formally endorsed the approach that an Expression of Interest process (if current funding is made available by government) for the services outlined in the paper, was run with Local Authority partners as soon as practical.

3. LEP Functions – Task and Finish Group and Expression of Interest Process

- 3.1 A Task and Finish Group, was established on the future of LEP functions and met on 15 August. All 6 local authorities were represented. It was chaired by Laura Church, Chief Executive of Bedford Borough Council. The area lead from Government, the s151 officer from Luton Borough Council and the SEMLEP Chief Executive were also present.
- 3.2 The Group discussed how to take forward the recommendation from the CAGB that an Expression of Interest (EOI) exercise should be initiated in the light of the letter from Ministers and further guidance. The Chief Executive of Bedford wrote

to all local authorities asking them to complete an EOI template and submit if they were interested in taking on LEP functions.

- 3.3 Two EOIs were received from West Northamptonshire Council and Luton Borough Council. An objective process was put in place for deciding between the two and as a result of this process, West Northamptonshire received the higher score. There were however strengths in Luton's EOI, including some interesting ideas around working with business and business representative organisations and marketing the key sectors for the area.
- 3.4 The SEMLEP Board meeting on Wednesday 18 October are recommended to agree that **West Northamptonshire Council** should be the host local authority for the transfer of LEP functions and that West Northamptonshire should consider taking on board some of the innovative suggestions in the EOI from Luton.

4. Summary of Current LEP Functions

4.1 LEP functions currently include:

Core Functions – This activity includes management, finance and communications, plus work on inward investment, sector advisory groups, analysis and evidence gathering for the whole area (including as an example labour market information) and delivery against regional policies.

This also includes the following two functions defined within the government's letter;

- **Business representation** – embedding a strong, independent and diverse local business voice into local democratic institutions - Government encourages single upper tier local authorities, or local authorities working together across a prospective devolution deal geography or functional economic area, to create or continue to engage with an Economic Growth Board (or similar) made up of local business leaders and relevant representative bodies to (a) provide the view of local businesses as part of regional decision making and (b) work with local leaders to create a broad economic strategy for the area.
- **Strategic economic planning** - Government encourages areas to produce – or continue to update – economic strategies to support local decision making, building on the plans currently developed and overseen by LEPs. Areas should share data, intelligence, and analysis as appropriate to support the needs of current and future government programmes.

Growth Hub - In areas where there is no devolution deal, government expects local authorities to work together to ensure seamless Growth Hub provision across the area, which will continue to support businesses and to provide a convening point for broader business support provision.

Careers Hub - In areas where there is no devolution deal, government expects local partners, such as local authorities, to work together to ensure Careers Hubs delivery continues so far as possible over existing geographies.

5. Next Steps

- 5.1 Detailed discussions around the future of existing LEP services and the implementation of the transfer can now be started between West Northamptonshire Council officers, the SEMLEP Chief Executive and Luton Borough Council as the Accountable Body. It is recommended that these are overseen by the Central Area Growth Board and an update provided to its December meeting by the Leader of West Northamptonshire Council and relevant officers.
- 5.2 West Northamptonshire will ensure that all local authority partners are engaged in shaping the future LEP functions, including the approach to strategic economic planning and business representation.
- 5.3 The Central Area Growth Board will draw up plans for a Business Board to ensure that a strong, independent and diverse local business voice is embedded in the future arrangements (see item 3). A report will be prepared for the next meeting of the CAGB setting out detailed proposals for the future model of LEP functions including how it will ensure that a strong, independent and diverse local business voice is embedded in the future arrangements.

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Central Area Growth Board Report

19 October 2023

Future Branding of the Central Area / South East Midlands

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| Report author | Sophie Lloyd Head of Economic Development, Milton Keynes City Council |
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1. Recommendations

- 1.1 That the Central Area Growth Board consider the possibility of using 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.

2. Context

- 2.1 At the 2 August meeting of the Central Area Growth Board, early discussions around the future branding of the Growth Board was discussed. A proposal to rename the growth board to 'South East Midlands Authorities' was explored, with a recommendation reached to explore the merits of keeping the South East Midlands brands moving forwards.
- 2.2 The following paper outlines the advantages that have been identified so far by officers of keeping the South East Midlands brand, and why this may be of particular value given the plans to integrate South East Midlands business services previously delivered by the South East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership (SEMLEP) within Local Authorities from 1 April 2024 onwards.

3. Identified Advantages of Retaining the South East Midlands Name

- 3.1 Through the process currently underway to move services previously delivered by the Local Enterprise Partnership into Local Democratic Institutions, all six authorities have agreed that they want to continue across the current footprint on 'larger than local' economic issues. This is the footprint that is already called the South East Midlands, so keeping the geography in the title 'South East Midlands' allows external partners and bodies to easily understand the work of the area and the geography it applies to.
- 3.2 With regards to any potential future Devolution, it should be noted that the names of Combined Authorities and regional growth boards are almost always named for the geographical area they cover. This allows partner organisations, residents, and businesses to easily understand the geography that is being discussed. The South East Midlands name for this region was arrived at

recognising the strong economic interlinks between the areas within it, and that historically, the areas within the South East Midlands region had been considered on the 'edges' of other regional footprints covered by Regional Development Agencies. Using a name that clearly identifies a geography could also prove helpful in asserting the region's national significance and importance with the Oxford-Cambridge pan Regional Partnership.

- 3.3 South East Midlands is now a recognised geography with government. Data and statistics are captured on this footprint by the Office for National Statistics, NOMIS and other official data sources. SEMLEP and the South East Midlands brand is also associated with a strong track record of delivery when it comes to government interactions and delivery of government funded schemes.
- 3.4 In terms of provision of direct business support, the South East Midlands has been the recognised geography for businesses since 2011. Retaining the South East Midlands name for regional working will allow businesses accessing Growth Hub or Careers and Enterprise Hub support within the six Local Authority areas to transition to the new arrangements more easily, which will support West Northamptonshire in delivery of regional focussed services.
- 3.5 Considerable effort, including on the part of the six Local Authorities in the area, has been invested in ensuring that businesses are aware of the South East Midlands as their regional footprint and the regional support available to them. The latest Business Survey across the South East Midlands area (2021) showed around 20% of businesses had heard of SEMLEP, up from 8% in the first survey in 2013. This demonstrates it can take a considerable time to build a brand for regional economic development among the business community. Were we to change the name of the Growth Board and the services now being delivered by Local Authorities, how we would build awareness of any new brand should be a key consideration. The SEMLEP social media accounts has established a strong following from businesses and business groups across the area, with thousands of LinkedIn and X (formerly Twitter) followers. Retaining the South East Midlands name would allow for an easier transfer of these accounts.
- 3.6 Businesses within the South East Midlands area have had access to the British Business Bank's £300+ million Midlands Engine Investment Fund (part I) and will have access from 2024 to the £400+ million Midlands Engine Investment Fund (part II.) South East Midlands based businesses have had good success in accessing this fund, and the link to the Midlands is an important factor in promoting the scheme to businesses within the area.
- 3.7 Letters received from the Business Community ahead of 2 August 2023 meeting indicate that private sector partners including the Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses are keen to be engaged moving forward on the South East Midlands footprint.

4. Next Steps

- 4.1 For the services to be transferred from the Local Enterprise Partnership into West Northamptonshire Council and run on behalf of the Central Area Local Authorities, the SEMLEP/South East Midlands brand will continue to be used for the immediate term.
- 4.2 If agreed by all six authorities, Leaders could consider the possibility of using 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.

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Central Area Growth Board Report

19 October 2023

Future of the Central Area Growth Board

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| Report author | Sophie Lloyd Head of Economic Development, Milton Keynes City Council |
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1. Recommendations

- 1.1 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.
- 1.2 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.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Central Area Growth board was originally established in 2018 as a shadow joint committee across the area known as the South East Midlands, to further joint working across the area and ensure a strong voice in issues related to the Oxford-Milton Keynes- Cambridge corridor.
- 2.2 The six Local Authorities have reconfirmed their intentions to continue working across this geographical area on larger than local issues, most recently in their decisions to continue across the central area footprint the business and economic services formally provided by the South East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership (SEMLEP) and due to be delivered by West Northamptonshire on behalf of the area from April 2024.
- 2.3 The context for this joint working has changed considerably since 2018, with a key focus now on issues of economic importance across the area and an exploration of potential level 2 Devolution for the area. With this context in mind, this marks a sensible point in time for Leaders of the Central Area growth board to develop more strategic thinking on the future of regional working across the area.

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