

Minutes of the meeting of the CENTRAL AREA GROWTH BOARD held on 14 FEBRUARY 2023 at 10.00am.

Present: Councillor P Marland (Milton Keynes City Council) (Chair)
Councillors D Hodgson (Bedford Borough Council), J Nunn (West Northamptonshire Council), J Smithers (North Northamptonshire Council), D Taylor (Luton Borough Council) and R Wenham (Central Bedfordshire Council).

Apologies: Councillor H Simmons (Luton Borough Council) substituted by Councillor D Taylor.

Also Present: C Austin (Bedford Borough Council), M Bracey (Milton Keynes City Council), R Bridge (North Northamptonshire Council), L Carver (Central Bedfordshire Council), H Chipping (SEMLEP), Councillor K Collins (Central Bedfordshire Council), K Hoctor (Cities and Local Growth Unit), P Horrocks (SEMLEP), S Lloyd (Milton Keynes City Council), N Monk (Luton Borough Council), P Northover (Cities and Local Growth Unit), S Timmiss (West Northamptonshire Council), Councillor B Wood (Cherwell District Council), C Stephens (Head of Legal Services) and three members of the public.

CB01 WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES

Councillor Marland welcomed members and other attendees to this, the first in person meeting, of the Central Area Growth Board. Councillor Marland noted that there was no provision for public questions to be taken by the Board at this meeting but that he would raise this issue at the next Leaders meeting.

The Chair noted an apology from Councillor Simmons who would be substituted by Councillor Taylor.

CB02 DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

None declared.

CB03 UPDATE ON DEVOLUTION DEALS

The Head of Economic Development (MKCC) introduced the update report on devolution deals. The report summarised the current situation including the devolution framework and SEMLEP reorganisation.

During discussion on the item the following points were raised:

- (a) Member authorities indicated that they were happy to go along on this journey but there were no guarantees that any of them would join a combined authority and it was further noted that West and North Northamptonshire had recently undergone significant transformation;
- (b) Officers needed to be clear that this was about delegation of powers from Westminster down to local authorities and was in no way about delegating powers upwards;
- (c) It was noted that the bar would need to be set very high and would have to involve transformational, aspirational infrastructure opportunities which were unable to be delivered by an individual authority. Projects of that type of scale would be what would get residents excited about the delivery and any changes in powers;
- (d) It was suggested that each authority might wish to clarify for each other what their 'ask' might be in terms of infrastructure projects;
- (e) Members noted that previous discussions by the group had indicated that there was no appetite across the six authorities for a directly elected mayor model and therefore it was a Level 1 devolution framework that they would most likely be looking at;
- (f) It was further noted that the Level 2 model was what would most likely be pursued as there were not many things that can not be done better at a local rather than national level. For example a bus network over a wider area would be a better prospect than over a single local area;

Officers from the Cities and Local Growth Unit (CLGU) noted that they were currently prioritising Level 3 deals and that some of the recent deals that had been agreed had included other things that were not on the list, that is, the list was not exhaustive. Officers from the CLGU queried why members did not want to look at a Level 3 deal?

Members advised that at a fundamental level it was because of the need to have a directly elected mayor and they considered that there was no basis as to why this should be required. It was further noted that the member authorities were working collaboratively as a group but they were within three different economic regions, police and health structures were not co-terminus and two of the authorities had only recently gone through significant organisational transformations. Any deal would need to bring 'additionality' and deliver something on top of what the individual authorities already did.

Members considered that if a Level 2 deal was off the table that it looked like the central areas was being taken for granted. The area had been working collaboratively together for over a decade and only seemed to hear false promises when what was needed was clarity from central government.

Devolution should be about how the area wanted to organise itself not to be told how to organise itself by Whitehall. The area was delivering six percent of the housing growth in the country but was not being given the opportunity of a deal that would support this population growth.

Offices from CLGU confirmed that a Level 2 deal would be a combined authority without a directly elected mayor.

ACTIONS ARISING:

1. That Central Area Leaders note the update on the Devolution agenda and the future of the LEP.
2. That officers in Central Area authorities investigate and seek clarity on the government's devolution agenda in line with the Central Area's priorities, and investigate pursuing a Level 2 deal.

CB04 UPDATE ON OXFORD-CAMBRIDGE PAN REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP

Councillor Wood from Cherwell District Council introduced the update paper on the Oxford-Cambridge Pan Regional Partnership.

The paper was an information report that set out a synopsis of what the Pan Regional Partnership was seeking to do. It was a culmination of many years work that set out a model of collaboration across a broader geography. There was no invasion of sovereignty, it was a partnership of the willing, and did not intend to replicate the work of other partnerships or individual authorities.

The Chair noted that he had received a question from a member of the public that commented that the Growth Board and Pan Regional Partnership needed to ensure that they both had buy in from the private sector at an early stage.

Members noted that they could be best described as lukewarm towards the concept of the Pan Regional Partnership. They did not feel that it was clearly defined or that it wouldn't duplicate work already being carried out by other organisations or authorities. Members were cautious given they made up the largest and fastest growing area of the Pan Regional Partnership yet the focus seemed very much on Oxford and Cambridge.

It was further noted that while members might be underwhelmed and jaded by the proposal there was some recognition as to the need to be part of it to see where it goes and to be able to bring about change from within.

Members raised concern about the cost and time associated with developing a prospectus for the Pan Regional Partnership and that there needed to be better definition of the benefits it might bring and there were also concerns raised about the democratic accountability of the many subgroups that the partnership had created.

Members considered that if the 'Arc' was easily definable and deliverable it would not have taken 50 years to get to this point and the business/university first model which seemed to be the focus might not meet the needs of residents outside of Oxford or Cambridge.

Councillor Wood summed up by noting that there was no intention to step on sovereignty or for this to be seen as an alternative to devolution. This was a separate entity that was seeking to work collaboratively as a region on a narrow range of objectives. It was noted that there would be benefits to being part of the collaboration but if there weren't then authorities were always free to leave.

Members noted that further clarity as to what was on the table would be helpful so that limited officer resource could be best deployed.

ACTIONS ARISING:

That the update report on the Oxford-Cambridge Pan Regional Partnership be noted.

CB05 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The dates of meetings for 2023/24 would be confirmed and circulated in due course.

THE CHAIR CLOSED THE MEETING AT 11.20