

Central Area Growth Board Report

19 October 2023

Future Branding of the Central Area / South East Midlands

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

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.