
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.