

Central Area Growth Board Report

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Update on Business Engagement

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1. Recommendations

- 1.1 That the report be noted.
- 1.2 To bring an update to the February meeting of the Central Area Growth Board on business engagement.

2 Background

- 2.1 Since the 19 October Central Area Growth Board meeting, work has been underway on both the future delivery of LEP services and the future of engagement with business. The Central Area Leaders met on 23 November 2023 to discuss the future of LEP services (including the future of business engagement), the future of the Growth Board and branding of the Central Area/South East Midlands.
- 2.2 One crucial element in ensuring the handover of the Strategic Economic Planning functions is how the business voice will be engaged moving forwards. Central Area leaders discussed at the 19 October meeting of the Growth Board the importance of the support and advice from the business community in helping shape the new arrangements and delivery.
- 2.3 Government guidance on the integration of LEP services into Local Authorities highlights the need to embed a strong, independent, and diverse local business voice into the new arrangements.
- 2.4 Ahead of the 2 August meeting, the Central Area growth board received two representations from business groups, with whom the co-Chairs have corresponded and who the co-Chairs will meet with soon.

3 Future of Business Engagement Arrangements

Principles and form of engagement structures

- 3.1 At the away day, and in the subsequent LA integration plan template, several principles were established. It should be recognised that the plans for business engagement are currently still in their formative stages so that they can be co-developed moving forwards with the business community.

- 3.2 The Central Area Leaders have agreed the intention to create an advisory business board to help inform the work of the Central Area Growth Board moving forwards. Broadly, this board will focus on:
- Providing a co-ordinated business voice for issues of common interest affecting the economy of the defined geography
 - Representing business to make sure the right resources are present in the defined geography
 - Helping to shape economic strategy to support local decision making
 - Contributing to the regional employment and skills agenda
 - Maximising the benefits of the Oxford Cambridge Pan Regional Partnership for the defined geography
- 3.3 The intention is to retain formal governance arrangements (boards) to oversee the work of the Growth Hub and the Careers Hub, although the opportunity will be taken to review membership to ensure that it is reflective of the geography, priority sectors and key interests. It will be considered whether such a board might be a joint arrangement covering both bodies. The Growth Hub has a well-established board which comprises of private and public sector membership, overseeing the performance of the Growth Hub and ensuring the right provision is in place for businesses across the defined geography.

Membership of Boards

- 3.4 On the issue of membership of the Main Central Area business board, which will advise the Central Area Growth Board, Leaders' reflections are that it would be beneficial for the membership group to provide representation of the most influential business leaders across the defined geography, including some of the largest employers, the key sector leaders, and leaders from higher and further education, and the VCSE sector. It would be anticipated that the individuals on this board be able to act as ambassadors for the area and represent its interests within national and international conversations.
- 3.5 It was also agreed that it would be helpful to explore creation of a federated model to ensure geographical representation of the whole of the central area. This would see local authority business boards, where they exist, linked into the model in some way – for example the Milton Keynes Business Council. One of the suggestions to explore is that chairs of agreed local business boards could be invited to sit on the main business board.
- 3.6 The Growth Hub / Careers Hub board(s) would then form another important aspect of the business engagement model. It has yet to be agreed whether the Growth Hub / Careers Hub board(s) would feed into the business board or directly into the CAGB as another aspect of the diverse business voice informing local decision making.

3.7 There are other business engagement groups which form part of the current SEMLEP model which may continue to comprise the wider model – including sector groups, a broader business representative / membership group and a rural businesses group. It will need to be explored which of these groups continue and what support could be provided.

4. Next Steps

4.1 As mentioned above, it is important to co-produce the new arrangements in collaboration with business and wider stakeholders. Therefore, the proposals set out above will be explored with business to further strengthen the design and ensure it is sustainable within the agreed funding envelope.

4.2 The following table represents the expected next steps with regards to engaging businesses across the South East Midlands in the new design of services previously provided by the LEP. Local Authority officers will agree a set of engagement questions to help guide the collation of all feedback at a regional level, although businesses will have the ability to provide guidance and comments outside the set questions.

Activity	Expected timescale
Each local authority to seek views from their key business / sector / education stakeholders on a 1:1 basis	Jan- Mar 24
Open series of stakeholder workshops for business, educational and VCSE sectors to input and engage	Jan 24
Utilise existing SEMLEP business / stakeholder groups to gain views and input	Existing programme of meetings Jan to Mar 24

4.3 The next meeting of the Central Area Growth Board is due to take place on Wednesday 14 February 2024, at which an update on business engagement at that stage will be bought.