



SOUTH EAST ENGLAND REGIONAL ASSEMBLY

BUSINESS PLAN 2006-09

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This business plan has been developed to meet the accountability requirements of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, from which a large proportion of the Assembly's funding derives. It conforms to the business planning model agreed between the English Regions Network and ODPM, which aims to achieve a consistent approach across all assemblies, the key features of which are a three-year business planning horizon and a common format.
- 1.2 This plan therefore sets out the Assembly's work programme and targets for the forthcoming year, from April 2006 to the end of March 2007, and also looks forward to the following two years to March 2009. This commentary includes a brief review of our achievements last year, looks forward to the key issues, challenges and risks for the year ahead, and indicates the Assembly's vision and direction for the longer term. The plan also includes a table setting out our work programme for the year and a financial annex showing the allocation of our budget across our nine objectives.

2. Review

- 2.1 The level of planned housing growth in the South East became a dominant political issue across the region during the 2005 local and general elections. By undertaking, in the run up to those, the most ambitious public consultation ever attempted on a regional plan, the Assembly placed itself in the midst of a heated public debate with implications for national competitiveness, housing market volatility, regional disparities, and the direction of public investment. It did not help that at the same time there was widespread public confusion about Government policy on regional devolution.
- 2.2 Given this turbulence a key priority for us throughout 2005-06 was to sustain the confidence both of Assembly members and of Government. Engagement has been sustained by our strong focus on core business. The independent evaluation undertaken by Arup for ODPM praised the Assembly for the

strength of its research, the efficiency of the secretariat operation, and the quality of our communications, including our 'gold star' website. Participation at Assembly meetings exceeded 80%; public awareness of the Assembly hit a new high of 56% of citizens.

- 2.3 The region's growth and infrastructure agenda has been the overriding concern of our robust dialogue with Government. The annual meeting of the Assembly in July 2005 reached a sound majority agreement on the core regional policies of the South East Plan. The outstanding elements of the draft Plan are on track for delivery to Ministers by the March 2006 deadline, and we will have commissioned over £0.5m of research to ensure a sound evidence base for the Plan's Examination in Public.
- 2.4 The Assembly's remit was consolidated by our statutory planning responsibilities, and 100% of our responses to planning consultations have been achieved within the 21 day time limit. Regional Funding Allocations also proved to be a critical development, placing the Assembly as the representative voice of the region at the heart of the process for reaching regional consensus on priorities and alignment. We have adopted responsibility for the Regional Transport Board and pioneered an innovative evaluation model that has been taken up by other regions.
- 2.5 We have continued to evolve constructive and effective scrutiny arrangements with SEEDA and other sectors, including health and environment. Three select committees reported, covering manufacturing, social inclusion, and business engagement. We worked closely with SEEDA to ensure the policy fit of the emerging Regional Economic Strategy with the Assembly's spatial strategy.
- 2.6 Finally, we also played an active role in European affairs, leading work for all the English regions on the Lisbon agenda, and working internationally with other EU regions on key issues such as climate change, waste and transport.
- 2.7 In summary, 2005-06 was an eventful and challenging year. Thanks to the long-term investment made over the past five years in partnership, in communications and in our evidence base, we have emerged through this turbulent time as an effective and capable organisation, in touch with our membership, increasingly acknowledged by the wider public, and giving real meaning to devolved regional decision-making.

3. The Year Ahead

- 3.1 Starting in November 2006, the South East Plan EIP promises to dominate our agenda this year, testing our evidence, analyses and proposed spatial policies for the region. The changing policy context, with new planning guidance on housing and the Government's response to Barker, will add further challenges.
- 3.2 There are important opportunities too presented by the Government's cross-cutting review on infrastructure, and new mechanisms, such as Planning Gain Supplement, to harness development value for infrastructural

investment. Our aim is to influence this agenda so that policies work for the region and that the South East gets its fair share of investment; input to the 2007 spending review will be critical.

- 3.3 The Regional Housing Board will transfer to the Assembly in 2006, delayed by ODPM stock-take, but offering a real chance to join up regional delivery agendas further and with greater impact. The ability to co-ordinate planning, transport and housing delivery at the strategic level will create new policy and partnership demands. We have earmarked resources to ensure these bodies are well supported and capable of project development.
- 3.4 Implementation will be a key theme in other respects too, maintaining an implementation plan and promoting policy delivery through projects, best practice, events and publications. We also anticipate a high workload on local development framework conformity and major planning applications.
- 3.5 Our scrutiny programme for the year has been negotiated and agreed with SEEDA, covering sustainable development, social enterprise and business support. In addition we will liaise on the National Audit office appraisal of the RDA. Our partnership work on other policy agendas, including health, environment, rural issues and social inclusion will also be sustained, as will our liaison with other regions, not only adjoining - on planning and transport in particular - but also nationally and internationally.

4. Vision and Direction

- 4.1 Within this demanding agenda the Assembly remains committed to our overall vision for the South East as “a distinctive, outward-looking, accessible region of prosperous, sustainable communities, with a high quality of life and environment”. We are therefore continuing to concentrate our energies and resources on our three established areas of core business, namely:
 - Advocacy - pressing the region’s interests in London and Brussels;
 - Accountability - scrutinising the Regional Development Agency and providing accountability for other regional bodies; and
 - Regional Planning - as the Regional Planning Body preparing and keeping up to date the strategic framework for physical development and transport in South East England.

- 4.2 These three core strands of the Assembly's remit continue to fit strongly with the expectations of our members, partners and stakeholders, as well as with the Government's developing regional agenda. However the common format for assembly business planning requires that our objectives and activities are aligned under consistent headings, so the plan is organised as follows:

Corporate activity

1. Being acknowledged as the representative voice of South East England.
2. Supporting Assembly members, stakeholders and partners.
3. Influencing national and European policies.

Planning and transport

4. Revising the Regional Spatial Strategy.
5. Implementing and monitoring the Regional Spatial Strategy.
6. Regional Spatial Strategy - sustaining partnership and engagement.

Policy integration and development

7. Providing a strategic focal point for regional governance.
8. Strengthening SEEDA's accountability to the region.
9. Augmenting the accountability of other regional bodies.

- 4.3 The processes proposed to further these nine objectives are listed in the plan under each of the three main headings, together with anticipated:

- Outcomes - the longer term consequences anticipated from this work,
- Outputs - the expected in-year results of our activities, and
- Delivery targets - against which our performance can be tracked.

- 4.4 We remain a lean organisation, and it is imperative that we remain focused if we are to add value. Where appropriate our way of working is 'task and finish'; recognising the calls on our members' time and the resources of our constituent bodies, as well as our own, we keep both our governance and policy development processes under constant review in order to remain a light-footed and responsive organisation.

- 4.5 We are also committed to remaining member-led. The Assembly's job is to be the voice of the region, as expressed through our members and constituent organisations. Although the proportion of our funding that comes from central Government has grown, it remains the democratic connection we have to our membership, and through them to the citizens of South East England, that gives us our core legitimacy, and marks us out from the regional quangos we aim to hold to account.

- 4.6 Member engagement therefore remains key. The strengthening role of the Assembly means that key decisions on policies and resources previously in the hands of remote civil servants - in respect for example of economic development, housing and transport - can now be shaped and influenced,

through our members, by the local authorities and stakeholders of the region.

5. Risk Assessment

- 5.1 In view of the importance to the Assembly's continued legitimacy of our members' continuing commitment, how the wider constitutional agenda develops is critical. City-regions are capable of accommodation within a regional framework, as our sub-regional approach to the South East Plan demonstrates. However, local government reorganisation is likely to prove an unwelcome distraction, jeopardising authorities' commitment to partnership and their engagement in regional affairs. The past association between regionalism and reorganisation was damaging, and needs to be avoided in future.
- 5.2 While the Assembly is financially resilient, and has sufficient reserves to cover contingent liabilities, significant member disengagement would threaten the organisation's legitimacy and influence. This could impact on our ability to retain and recruit staff of calibre, whereas at present the intellectual strength of the South East policy community (amongst both regional and sub-regional partner bodies) is a significant asset.
- 5.3 More specifically there are risks associated with the South East Plan. Any delay in the EIP itself or in the panel report will inevitably feed through into subsequent milestones. This could also impact policy implementation, creating an uncertain policy environment, and hindering the follow through of targets into local development plans.
- 5.4 The moving goal posts represented by the Government's response to Barker presents a number of further risks, not only to the acceptability of the Plan its final form, but also to the practical delivery of infrastructure alongside jobs and homes. Inadequate tools to create sustainable communities, either in planning growth or leveraging investment, will put at risk the quality of life and environment of the South East, aggravating congestion and jeopardising the region's functionality. This would have significant, adverse economic implications for both the region and the country. The outcome of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review could conceivably present similar challenges.

6. Finances

- 6.1 Within our overall proposed budgets for the forthcoming three years, a sizable contribution to cash income continues to be anticipated from our constituent local authorities; however in view of the severe financial pressures on the region's councils the Assembly has agreed that local authority subscriptions for 2006-07 should be held at current levels. We also benefit from contributions in-kind and additional income is expected from other sources, including individual project sponsorship from regional partners.

South East England Regional Assembly Income 2006-09

£000's	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09
Subscriptions	682.2	682.2	702.6
ODPM funding	3,400.0	3,650.0	3,650.0
Other	77.0	77.0	77.0
Total	4,159.2	4,409.2	4,429.6

- 6.2 This Plan was placed before the Assembly's Executive Committee for consideration and agreement on 20 January 2006, and will be signed off on the same day by the Board of SEERA Ltd as the accountable body.

Paul Bevan
Chief Executive

January 2006