

## **SOUTH EAST ENGLAND REGIONAL ASSEMBLY SELECT COMMITTEE ON SEEDA'S APPROACH TO LABOUR FORCE AND EMPLOYMENT**

Submission from: **Buckinghamshire Economic and Learning Partnership**

Date: **September 2008**

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The Buckinghamshire Economic and Learning Partnership (BELP) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the review of SEEDA's approach to Labour Force and Employment.

BELP is responsible for the development of the Buckinghamshire economic development strategy, of which skills and learning forms a key part.

Please find attached our response, which has been informed by comments received from our key partners. In particular this incorporates the views of Buckinghamshire County Council who have inputted to this collective response.

The Paper poses nine key questions:

- 1. Within the RES, does SEEDA adequately capture the range of key issues and challenges regarding labour force and employment in the region?***

The paper highlights that the RES contains challenging targets around employability. There is a need for this to be linked to resources available, and practicality of application. However, we are content that the RES identifies all of the relevant key issues and challenges. As the sub regional partnership bringing private and public sectors together within the county, we recognise the efforts that SEEDA have made to engage with local partners.

- 2. How effective are the key strategic regional agencies with an interest in labour force and employment, such as SEEDA, Job Centre Plus and the Learning and Skills Council, in developing a joined up and coherent approach?***

The big challenge in all of this is to develop a joined-up and coherent approach. BELP's argument has been that as far as we can see, there is no significant evidence of the type of composite formula that would render SEEDA effective in pulling together the various constituent partners. In the list given, we believe that the identification of economic partnerships would strengthen the ability for this objective to be achieved.

- 3. SEEDA's Corporate Plan gives considerable emphasis to higher level management and technical skills. Is this focus appropriate and what should it do to also ensure development of basic skills and employability?***

As the Region is seeking to develop high-value employment, the approach of SEEDA's Corporate Plan is broadly correct. There was past criticism of SEEDA on the lack of emphasis on basic skills and employability, but this is now adequately covered in the RES, by reference to the work of other agencies etc. In real terms there is little more that SEEDA can do to directly assist on this issue, other than work already identified, in our view.

***4. Is the range of SEEDA's activities appropriate and suitably targeted to tackle labour force and employment issues? Where should the balance lie between strategic and local interventions?***

The list of 17 programmes, actions and interventions is a comprehensive range of areas for action, and entirely appropriate in respect of labour force and employment issues. Each of the 17 is individually targeted, and each is appropriate. However, as ever, it is the bringing forward of these 17 as a coherent whole that is the challenge.

As an EP, BELP has only been involved in a few of these 17 in a direct form. Specifically the LSPA's we see as having a significant practical future, with the assistance of EPs. The balance between strategic and local interventions is always a difficult one, which depends to some extent on the existing effectiveness of local initiatives. It could be argued that SEEDA should concentrate on achieving a strategic role in respect of the 17, enabling local initiative to work better through a coherent strategy.

A key issue locally is that of out commuting from the county. This links in to labour force and employment directly as many of our skilled residents leave the county and indeed the region on a daily basis. We wish to give much more emphasis to how we seek to overcome this particular challenge.

***5. Is SEEDA doing enough to encourage sustainable job creation in the region, particularly in under-performing areas? How and where should it focus resources on this issue to best effect?***

SEEDA, in practical terms, could never do sufficient to encourage sustainable job creation on its own across a region as diverse as the South East. Equally, the focus of resources has been a long debate, in our view not yet resolved. We consider that SEEDA should act as 'enablers', working in a strategic role, to enable more localised appropriate initiative to succeed.

We question the role of SEEDA as property developers, and believe that this activity detracts from the main focus of the organisation, possibly to the detriment of other initiatives.

In paragraph 6.9 of the Report, there is a quote from a business representative on an LSPA, which to the effect that SEEDA should try to develop a more in-depth understanding of the needs of the specific parts of the Region. It is a comment with which we would concur. Further, we

support moves to ensure that current investment is targeted to areas where impact could be greatest.

***6. How effective is SEEDA in engaging with businesses to understand their skills needs and in promoting employer's responsibilities regarding skills development?***

To the extent where SEEDA engages with business through EPs, it is generally very effective. However, this relationship in our view needs to be seriously reinforced, and this is a key objective of BELP. It is this promotion, through local partners, that will ensure the understanding reaches SMEs in particular.

As it mentions in the report, 'employability' is a relatively new area for SEEDA. Within the RES, economic activity increases from 82% to 85%, a target which is stretching, by any standards. This means that a significant number of additional people moving into labour market must come from sources which are inherently difficult to communicate with. It is by working with local partners such as EP's that these groups can be reached.

***7. What has been your experience of the Regional Skills for Productivity Alliance? What needs to be done to ensure its long-term effectiveness? What can SEEDA or other partners do to support the evolution of Local Skills for Productivity Alliances into revised roles as local Employment and Skills Boards?***

We have no close experience of the RSPA. However, the LSPA is still effectively in an early stage of development. Its long-term effectiveness depends upon support at the coalface of both employment and education. In our view, the LSPA needs local support and resourcing, and stronger promotion, via EPs. It is by such inputs that the LSPAs can move into revised roles as LESBs.

***8. How effectively to SEEDA and other strategic regional organisations engage with further and higher education sectors, voluntary and community sector, local partners and deliverers to tackle employment and labour issues in the region? What more needs to be done?***

The extent to which SEEDA and others engage with FHE providers and others varies dramatically between organisations. SEEDA should strengthen its links with EPs in this area, and this should be a priority action.

We do not believe that SEEDA itself has the resources to provide such engagement over the whole Region, and therefore stronger engagement with local partners should be a prime objective. We believe there is much to be gained by SEEDA reinforcing its links with the FHE sector in particular. The EPs can help facilitate this.

***9. How effectively do SEEDA and local authorities work together on labour force and employment issues? In the light of an increasing role for local authorities in this area, what more needs to be done to ensure effective joined-up working arrangements?***

We see increasing evidence of SEEDA and local authorities working together in this role, form an historically low base. However, given that the LAs are to play such a key role, we believe it is vital that SEEDA works with its local partners, including the EPs. EPs have a key role to play in the development of relationships within the LAA and it has been proven in Bucks that the EP provides a unique input into the practicalities of the LAA.

This input will become increasingly important at LAAs move into MAAs. Consequently, there is a great deal of work in our view still to be done in the area of developing relations between SEEDA and local authorities. This view is of course given with a Buckinghamshire perspective, but anecdotal evidence suggests that this experience is fairly common. A further consequence of the need for SEEDA and local authorities to work in harmony will be the need for additional resource by SEEDA, in pursuing these objectives.

The important role of local education business partnerships could be understood and highlighted more by SEEDA, as an existing mechanism to drive enterprise within the educational system.

Finally, whilst much of SEEDAs project work has been innovative and had high impact, there is a need to ensure that sustainability of project initiatives is given due consideration, to avoid any issues of 'initiative fatigue' and that projects that are gaining traction, such as the broadband initiative, are given support for appropriate periods.

**Conclusion:**

We believe that the conclusion to the Report is very largely accurate in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the present SEEDA relationships and programme.

We agree that the IDMs have largely been successful, and Buckinghamshire has benefited from programme, which was deservedly extended.

Sean Hickey  
Interim Chief Executive