

Consultation Response – West Oxfordshire District Council
(Officer Response - 6 April 2005)

West Oxfordshire District Council welcomes the opportunity to submit comments to the Select Committee established to look at the impact of SEEDA in benefiting manufacturing business in the region.

Where possible, the Council's response is set out below in terms of issues highlighted in the Select Committee's Context and Issues Paper (March 2005) that introduces the consultation. However, it has been difficult to frame comments on the Manufacturing Advisory Service (MAS) based on this paper, as the document gives only a patchy introduction to this area of activity. The profile data on the manufacturing sector in the South East is limited; and there is an absence of background information on MAS activities and resources (budgets and staffing level). In addition, it is difficult to draw any meaningful lessons for the support activity in the South East from the limited overview of relevant strategies in other regions.

In Section 2 (Summary of issues and recommendations – what more could be done?), the Context and Issues Paper outlines employers' concerns about the cost of training, closure of engineering training in the region, gaps in provision and the depth and quality of provision. The paper is right to highlight what is the extent of SEEDA's influencing role as a main issue – but where is the clear accountability for delivery on this issue?

In Section 6, the commentary on relevant initiatives including the new "Framework for Business Support (Joining Forces Framework)" and the "Skills for Productivity Alliance" illustrate the complexity of organisational and partnership inputs to this policy issue. It is not clear where consultee manufacturing businesses can have an input to these processes and help ensure that the skills agenda in the region is "demand-led and driven by the needs of employers". It also not clear what are the scope/ intended impacts of each the interventions within the plethora of initiatives identified and which organisation is ultimately accountable for effective delivery of successful outcomes.

In Section 4 (SEEDA's Manufacturing Strategy) the Issues Paper notes that SEEDA's Regional Economic Strategy must support continuous improvement and raising productivity through a range of identified areas of action. For example, it is stated that best practice can be supported through Enterprise Hubs and business networks. Whilst this point is reasonable, it must be borne in mind that SEEDA's Enterprise Hubs and certain other initiatives are sited in specific locations and there has been limited success in spreading learning to areas that are not served by a particular intervention.

In outlining the Manufacturing Advisory Service Approach (Section 6), the Issues Paper notes that the number of leads coming from Business Links decreased following the removal of a paid service level agreement. This outcome is odd given the functioning of Business Link as a broker organisation that facilitates access to sources of business support. Presumably, the effective functioning of the Business Link referral mechanism will be reviewed under the new Joining Forces initiative that aims to set an appropriate framework for publicly funded business support organisations in the South East.

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Discussion Issue 3 states that “Only 2% of companies which MAS could have supported were supported with in-depth consultancy due to limited resources. How adequate were the resources set aside for the MAS and those set aside for the proposed MAS in 2005-8?” It is impossible to comment on this important issue based on the background information provided in the issues paper. It would have been useful for the paper to have outlined a detailed summary of MAS activity (ie the numbers of companies in receipt of in-depth consultancy (split by company sector and geographic locations); set alongside the MAS budget and expenditure 2002-5; and the budget 2005-8, plan of activity 2005-8.

There is nowhere in the Context and Issues Paper where the partnership and economic development role of local authorities is drawn into the consideration of the most effective arrangements for manufacturing business support. For example, it is disappointing that under Section 6 (Skills for Manufacturing) the paragraph that highlights the “need to engage effectively with schools to promote the world of engineering” does not acknowledge that many Councils and their local strategic partnerships will already have arrangements for an education and business liaison that could easily provide a framework to support the development of this type of initiative. There are other ways in which local authorities can offer a useful (and local) input to work that supports the manufacturing sector – why has this role been completely missed in the paper?

Whilst it is appropriate that Business Link should be recognised as the “access brand” for business support, it would be useful for the full range of partner organisations (including local authority economic development functions) to be equipped with the background knowledge that can enable them to make appropriate referrals of MAS support cases.

In looking at SEEDA’s interventions in support of manufacturing in the South East, it would be useful for the review to retain an overview of other significant challenges facing the sector in the region and the more broadly based SEEDA strategy areas that are significant. The narrow scope of the Issues Paper (with its examination of the MAS) serves to mask the significant difficulties facing the sector. For example, the need for a better transport infrastructure that can service manufacturing businesses in specific areas remains a pressing issue that is communicated to local authorities. There are other such broad problems that afflict employment in manufacturing businesses – these include the lack of affordable housing and labour-force skills issues.

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6 April 2005