

**SOUTH EAST ENGLAND REGIONAL ASSEMBLY  
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

Date: 13 June 2008

Subject: **Joint Europe Committee**

Report of: Chief Executive

**Recommendation:**

The Leadership Group recommends that the Assembly's participation in and administration of the Joint Europe Committee ceases with effect from the annual meeting on 16 July 2008.

**Purpose of the Report:**

For the Executive Committee to review the Assembly's participation in the Joint Europe Committee.

Assembly members on the Committee have been consulted on this report, and SEEDA colleagues have been alerted to its recommendation.

**Key Issues:**

- The Assembly's approved business plan anticipates a tapering involvement in certain areas of activity beyond our core business as capacity reduces during 2008-10. The plan does not provide for dedicated resources to undertake European advocacy work in 2009-10.
- The Assembly's participation in the Joint Europe Committee is the most expendable aspect of our current European work. Assembly dialogue with European policy makers and our participation in European programmes, both through programme monitoring committee representation and transnational projects, will continue.

## **1. Background**

- 1.1 In the context of the Sub-National Review (SNR) the Government's funding of regional assemblies from 2008 onwards is strongly focused on the core functions of planning, transport and housing. In particular, Communities and Local Government (CLG) have made it clear that they will no longer support assemblies' advocacy activities, or policy work beyond these core areas of business. In anticipating a gradual reduction in capacity as the Assembly moves towards winding up in 2010, our approved business plan accordingly focuses our tapering staff resources on the Regional Planning Body function through the current year. For 2009-10 the plan does not include any specific provision for policy or advocacy activities on such areas as Europe, health, skills, etc.
- 1.2 There are a number of strands of Assembly activity on the European agenda:
- Dialogue on planning, transport and environmental matters.
  - Participation in transnational projects, part-funded by EU grant.
  - Representation on programme monitoring committees.
  - Advocacy on the region's behalf through our joint representation in Brussels with SEEDA.
  - Administration and participation in the Joint Europe Committee.
- 1.3 Given the terms of CLG's funding of the Assembly and our reducing capacity, the Assembly's Leadership Group at their meeting on 11 April 2008 considered from which aspects of our work on Europe we should plan the Assembly's early withdrawal.

## **2. Joint Europe Committee (JEC)**

- 2.1 The JEC was created in 2000 as a joint regional committee between the Assembly and SEEDA primarily in order to provide a common focus for influencing European policy. This was a time when the SEEDA board had created a number of sub-committees on key aspects of the Regional Economic Strategy (skills, rural, innovation, regeneration, etc.), and there was agreement between the RDA and Assembly that Europe should be addressed jointly in view of the existing involvement of local authority led partnerships in the European agenda. The Assembly secretariat administers the JEC, while meeting agendas are programmed jointly by SEEDA and ourselves in consultation with other partners.
- 2.2 The JEC has acted as a focus for bringing together the region's advocacy and representation on EU issues. This included the creation under SEEDA's lead of South East England House in Brussels, which co-located sub-regional representations with a joint SEEDA/Assembly Brussels office. With that development a third element was added to the JEC, namely representation from the four sub-regional European partnerships, so that it became a three-way joint committee, comprising four Assembly members, four SEEDA board members, and four councillors representing sub-regional partnerships. One continuing cause of contention however is that as a regional committee, the chairmanship has only ever rotated between the Assembly and SEEDA.

- 2.3 Beyond the early success of South East England House, the JEC has aimed to coalesce a common regional view from the South East on various policy issues, including reviews of EU structural funds, the Lisbon agenda, social policy etc. It has also provided a forum to which the South East's representatives on the Committee of the Regions are able to report back. The Committee has also had the benefit of routine monitoring reports from GOSE on the expenditure and outcomes from existing EU programmes in the region. Most of the committee's agenda however has always been for information and discussion rather than for decision, which has led members recurrently to question its continuing value.
- 2.4 2006 saw significant changes to the region's representation in Brussels. South East England House was vacated, with Kent County Council taking a lease on a new space for their own partnership alongside the Assembly/SEEDA office (the South East England Brussels office) and a combined operation for the other three sub-regional representations now merged into 'Southern England Local Partners'.
- 2.5 At the same time concern within the JEC about the committee's added value provoked a further review of its role, such that it resolved to reduce the frequency of its meetings. Since 2006 there has been an annual conference in November followed by a JEC meeting to agree a programme of work for the coming year, and meetings in February and June to monitor progress. The June meeting has been held in Brussels in combination with a roundtable seminar and reception involving representatives from the Commission and other regions. Some of the region's MEPs have also been involved in these events.
- 2.6 The next meeting of the JEC takes place on 4 June again as part of a programmed visit to Brussels involving a seminar and reception. The committee is currently chaired by Sue John, a SEEDA board member. Although the chair is due to rotate to the Assembly in November the sub-regional partners are pressing once more for the rotation to become three-way rather than just between SEEDA and the Assembly. Such constitutional disputes continue to inhibit the JEC's effectiveness.

### **3. Other Assembly Work on Europe**

- 3.1 Besides administering and participating in the JEC the Assembly's other work on Europe can be summarised as:

- **Dialogue on planning, transport and environmental matters**

European policy and legislation provides an important context for regional spatial planning. Naturally therefore dialogue with policy-makers at European level is part of our core business, just as it is at the national level, and needs to continue.

- **Participation in transnational projects, part-funded by EU grant**

Exchange of experience through EU funded projects has proved useful to leading-edge policy development on issues ranging from climate change to waste and transport. We expect to scale down our participation in such projects but will continue to join in projects which add clear value to policy areas of most concern to the region.

- **Representation on programme monitoring committees**

While it continues to exist the Assembly has representation on the Competitiveness PMC and is able to work alongside individual local authorities and stakeholders to ensure the programme fulfils its objectives effectively and accountably in line with agreed regional priorities. We have also engaged in discussions about representation on the PMCs for the INTERREG transnational programmes.

- **Advocacy on the region's behalf through our joint representation in Brussels**

The South East England Brussels office has two permanent staff and a stagiere in SEEDA's employment. These staff work with Guildford based colleagues in SEEDA and the Assembly to influence the development of European policy on such issues as environment and innovation. The Assembly contributes towards the costs of the office; £75,000 is budgeted for the current financial year but the approved business plan anticipates no equivalent expenditure in 2009-10. SEEDA is understood to be planning a review of the regional representation in Brussels this year.

#### **4. Conclusion**

- 4.1 In the light of the SNR and our need to focus the Assembly's reducing capacity on core business, the Assembly's Leadership Group recently concluded that we should cease participation in and administration of the JEC with effect from July 2008. Although the JEC has undertaken useful work in providing a forum for debate and co-ordinating regional advocacy on European issues, this mechanism and these outcomes are of less priority than other aspects of the Assembly's work on Europe closer to our core business as regional planning body.

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