

**SOUTH EAST ENGLAND REGIONAL ASSEMBLY  
ANNUAL MEETING**

Date: 16 July 2008

Subject: **Chairman's Report**

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**1. Purpose of the Report**

- 1.1 You have the Assembly's annual report. This is my additional report on the work of the Executive Committee and of the Leadership Group since the Assembly last met in plenary session in March at Reading. During that time there have been two meetings of the Executive Committee, in April and in June, both of which were followed by a meeting of the Leadership Group.
- 1.2 The Executive Committee has received routine reports from the Chairmen of the Regional Planning Committee and the Regional Housing and Transport Boards. All three colleagues have filed their own reports for you today on their work since the March plenary meeting. The Assembly's Deputy Chair is also reporting directly to you today on our scrutiny work, which he so ably leads.
- 1.3 Both the Executive Committee and the Leadership Group have monitored the Assembly's finances through regular budget reports. We were pleased to note that, following the Assembly's deferral at its last meeting of the public consultation on the partial review of the South East Plan in respect of gypsy and traveller policies, the Government allowed us to carry forward to the new financial year the grant funds earmarked for that exercise.
- 1.4 My report accordingly focuses on the following:
- The Sub-National Review
  - SEEDA's Corporate Plan
  - Delivering the South East Plan
  - Eco-towns
  - The Joint Europe Committee

**2. The Sub-National Review (SNR)**

- 2.1 When we last met in March we were still waiting for the Government to publish its long-promised consultation on implementing the SNR. This finally emerged at the end of that month, with a response deadline of 20 June. Both meetings of the Executive Committee therefore had the opportunity to debate the SNR, and it has inevitably absorbed a great deal of my and others' time and energy beyond those meetings too. In April members of the

Executive Committee received the consultation document - 'Prosperous Places' - and gave their initial reaction, on the basis of which a response on behalf of the Assembly was drafted for consideration at our June meeting. Many of you will also have attended one of two regional consultation events held by GOSE at the DEFRA HQ in London, hosted by our Regional Minister, Jonathan Shaw.

- 2.2 As a region we have been at the forefront of opposition to the transfer of regional planning housing and transport to the RDAs. What is more I am pleased to observe that the strength of our challenge has caused other regions to reconsider their initial plans to co-operate pragmatically with the changes. It may well be that strategic planning policies have much greater significance and cause much more controversy here, while other regions are more ready to trade influence over planning for greater economic development impact. Be that as it may, there is a stronger sense now of an alliance of regions and others such as the LGA and national stakeholder interests, coming out against the democratic deficit in the SNR proposals.
- 2.3 As your Chairman I have taken the argument very strongly to Government, speaking uncompromisingly at the two consultation events, and following these up with a key meeting with Housing and Planning Minister Caroline Flint. I have also written to other Ministers, and have sought the support of other assembly chairmen, the LGA nationally and the Opposition front bench. The Assembly's response to 'Prosperous Places' agreed by the Executive Committee is attached as annex 1 to this paper. It comprises an overall critique, followed by answers to most of the consultation questions, some of which address detailed technical issues to which replies were agreed by the Regional Planning Committee. Also appended (annex 2) is the submission from the English Regions Network.
- 2.4 While there is a possibility that the legislation to implement the SNR fully may not reach the statute book before the General Election, I do believe we need to be pro-active in developing new governance arrangements for the region. We will inevitably find that the intention now expressed by both main political parties to abolish regional assemblies will increasingly compromise the influence and even the viability of this Assembly. In particular it will be difficult to retain expert staff and impossible to attract them unless we can map out, sooner rather than later, a clear future for regional policy-making in the South East.
- 2.5 My own view is that local authorities must take the lead. It is a matter of regret, but nevertheless of fact, that the SNR has damaged the Assembly's constructive partnership between councils and social, environmental and economic partners. In future the latter are to be 'engaged and managed' by the RDA, and there is dialogue in hand as to how that relationship might develop. In the meantime, if our overriding concern is for the loss of local democratic accountability at the regional level, then local government collectively must take the regional initiative. The emergence of South East Councils provides the representative democratic forum to treat with Government on these issues, and to negotiate an early settlement for our region.

### **3. SEEDA's Corporate Plan**

3.1 At its April meeting the Executive Committee received the final version of SEEDA's Corporate Plan following our select committee on it in February and the Assembly plenary discussion of it in March. We were disappointed that some of our concerns had not been taken on board as far as we would have liked and the Committee asked me to write to Pam Alexander on these outstanding issues. These were:

- Good governance as a key pillar of sustainable development. I urged SEEDA to be more specific about how it will demonstrate clear accountability to the region.
- Delegation of economic development delivery. I sought more detail on how SEEDA will work with local government in the region and pressed again for a commitment to delegate 50% of the RDA budget by 2010.
- SNR route-map. I reiterated the need for the Plan to set out at a high-level the key steps and milestones in moving towards the new agency.
- Funding regional planning. I suggested the Corporate Plan should make a stronger case to Government for the need for additional funding to take on responsibility for regional planning.

3.2 I am told that SEEDA colleagues were as helpful as they could be in accommodating our concerns, but, as reflected in our response to 'Prosperous Places', they were constrained by the views of the Whitehall minders responsible for scrutinising RDA plans for Ministerial sign-off.

3.3 I do feel that the robust and constructive working relationship we have built with SEEDA over the years is so far largely surviving the tensions introduced by the SNR. Partnership remains strong at the level of technical co-operation, assisted by a timely nine-month placement of the Assembly's Director of Development, Martin Tugwell, on secondment within SEEDA. Because Martin's responsibility is for the region's shared delivery agenda for infrastructure, housing and transport, he is uniquely placed to sustain joint working and facilitate change management.

### **4. Delivering the South East Plan**

4.1 April's Executive Committee also received a very full report tracking progress on the implementation plan for the South East Plan, updated in October 2006 for the Examination in Public as 'Delivering the South East Plan'. Delivery is an important dimension of the Assembly's work, encompassing for example the Regional Transport and Housing Boards' programmes as well as our conformity role in relation to local development frameworks and major planning applications.

4.2 This was the first attempt at a systematic progress review of the implementation plan. At the regional level the report reflected on the steps taken to increase public sector investment, to harness private sector

investment, to improve the alignment of investment programmes and to achieve better recognition of the region's 'gateway' function. It also looked at efforts, mostly national, to promote behavioural change, e.g. around the way we live and use resources, as well as progress on delivery at the sub-regional level.

- 4.3 While not a comprehensive audit the tracking usefully showed where progress has been made, and where it has been slower and future attention needs to be focused. The Committee agreed that the annual Regional Monitoring Report should be expanded in order also to capture information on progress of key actions in order to complement the existing monitoring of outcomes against indicators.
- 4.4 Still on implementation, the June meeting of the Executive Committee received updates on the single regional delivery plan and the Regional Infrastructure Fund (RIF). Both are currently in preparation. The single delivery plan - which incidentally anticipates most of the SNR's aims but achieves them without diverting energy into changing regional structures - is being drawn up from the implementation plans for the Regional Economic Strategy and the South East Plan. It will be a short-horizon action plan that will effectively be the core of the region's advice later this year on Regional Funding Allocations.
- 4.5 On the RIF, 'top-sliced' money has been committed by SEEDA, the Regional Transport Board and the Regional Housing Board, although the RHB's contribution awaits clearance from Whitehall. The machinery for governing the RIF has been agreed regionally and must now be squared with the Treasury. Pilot projects to benefit from the Fund are being identified.

## **5. Eco-towns**

- 5.1 The June meeting of the Executive Committee considered and agreed the Assembly's response to the Government's controversial consultation on eco-towns, three of which are proposed in the South East - at Bordon-Whitehill in East Hampshire, at Weston Otmoor in Cherwell, Oxfordshire, and at Ford in Arun, West Sussex.
- 5.2 The eco-towns proposition has developed outside of the normal regional and local planning process. Only Bordon-Whitehill was considered in the preparation of the draft South East Plan (at the Examination in Public) and has the support of the local planning authority. A new Planning Policy Statement is being developed to provide the national policy framework within which eco-town applications will be considered. The PPS will be issued for consultation in July 2008 along with findings of the sustainability appraisal of the proposals. A final PPS and a final list of eco-towns proposals will be issued at the end of 2008.
- 5.3 While supporting the high environmental standards being promoted in eco-town proposals, the Committee endorsed a range of concerns over the nature of the process, fit with the South East Plan and local development

frameworks, the adequacy and deliverability of the infrastructure offer attached to each scheme and the appraisal process.

- 5.4 On the three proposals identified in the region the Committee agreed to respond that:
- Bordon-Whitehill has the potential to offer a good fit with the spatial strategy, reflecting the South East Plan EiP Panel recommendation that there should not be an impediment to an increase in housing at this location (above the 2,500 dwellings they recommend) as long as this is shown to be sustainable.
  - Both Weston Otmoor and Ford are inconsistent with the spatial strategy and would undermine the ability to deliver agreed spatial and economic priorities in the sub-regional area.

## **6. Joint Europe Committee**

- 6.1 Because of the SNR the Assembly's approved business plan anticipates a tapering involvement in certain areas of activity beyond our core business as capacity reduces through 2008-10. The plan does not provide for dedicated resources to undertake European advocacy work in 2009-10. The June Executive Committee therefore agreed a recommendation from the Leadership Group that the Assembly's participation in and administration of the Joint Europe Committee should cease with effect from today's annual meeting. As a result nominations to the JEC have not been invited from party and partners groups.
- 6.2 We agreed that 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 trans-national projects, will continue.

**Cllr Keith R Mitchell, CBE**  
**Chairman**

26 June 2008

Annex 1 - Assembly response to 'Prosperous Places'

Annex 2 - ERN response to 'Prosperous Places'