

**SEEC PLENARY
4 DECEMBER 2009**

DRAFT MINUTES

1. a) Apologies and Substitutes

Noted by Paul Watkins

b) Declaration of interests

No declarations of interest were given.

2. Chairman's Update – Paul Carter gave a brief update on current SEEC issues. He also explained that the SEEC website (www.secouncils.gov.uk) had also been launched today.

3. Minutes of SEEC AGM 15th July 2009 - The minutes were approved as an accurate record.

4. Draft Minutes of the Leaders Board and SEERA Ltd AGM – 16th October 2009

The SEERA Ltd Board was reconstituted with Paul Carter, Louise Bloom, Tony Page, Mike Appleyard, Gordon Keymer, George Beckett and Diana Pogson reappointed as Directors. Legal advice was to be sought to moving from SEERA Ltd to SEEC Ltd.

The LGA has appointed David Parsons, Leader of Leicestershire County Council (Con) as its South East region representative. Agreed to invite David Parsons and David Shakespeare to the next SEEC Plenary to further discussions.

71 local authorities have currently signed up to be members of SEEC. Medway, Gosport and Mole Valley were the only authorities that had not signed up as members.

5. Boards, Delivery Boards and Planning Panel Updates

Regional Housing and Regeneration Board (RHRB) – update given by the Chairman, Cllr Elizabeth Cartwright.

- Concerns expressed about reductions in the Growth Fund.
- Concerns about cuts in Private Sector Renewal Fund from £30m to £24m next year.
- Concerns had been raised about the costs of providing sites for gypsies and travellers. Gillian Brown (Arun DC) asked how £5.5m could be justified for 90 pitches when councils are crying out for funding for new homes. Cllr Cartwright explained that the costs spiralled as these sites are 'gold plated' in terms of services/facilities. CLG had also expressed concern about spiralling costs.
- In August 2009, 52,600 mortgages had been approved, 29% increase on the year before but if followed the 7 year trend would have been nearer 100,000 approvals; house prices 18% lower

than at peak; NHBC had received applications for 29,000 homes, up just 2% on year before; 3,112 new starts in the South East, about the same as the previous year.

- Paul Carter asked if all authorities could see a breakdown of housing starts and completions by category (intermediate, private sector etc) per unitary/county/district area.

Partnership Board and Strategy Board - update given by the Chairman of the Strategy Board, Paul Carter

- The Partnership and Strategy Boards have been working on the Terms of Reference of the various Boards. These would be reviewed in a year's time.
- The Partnership and Strategy Boards had discussed the development and evolution of the Single Regional Strategy with a workshop that had taken place the previous week.
- Agreed that SEEC had to press on the Treasury the need to provide more infrastructure funding for the South East.

Planning Panel – Update from the Chairman, Cllr Moira Gibson

- Have been looking at areas on which the Planning Panel can give technical advice to the Strategy Board. The Panel had reviewed the single Regional Strategy and the evidence gathering process. Many local authorities will have started evidence gathering for their Local Development Framework process, so the Planning Panel has written to councils asking for information that they have already prepared for this process.
- Gypsy and Traveller transit sites - it will be for counties and districts to make their case at the Examination in Public in February 2010.
- Community Infrastructure Levy will be introduced in April if CLG stick to their timetable. District and Borough Councils whose core strategies had not been approved would not be able to raise funding for infrastructure through CIL – and councils will only be able to raise money for affordable housing under S106 and nothing for infrastructure under S016. Representations have been made to CLG.

Regional Transport Board – Paul Watkins gave an update on behalf of Cllr David Robertson

- Forward funding mechanisms have enabled delivery of new transport infrastructure with the Ashford scheme (improvements to Junction 9 off the M20) in the first tranche of decision-making. These are “oven ready” schemes that would not be able to go ahead without some pump priming.
- A21 Borestone junction is causing concerns about costing. RTB supports it but believes may be a more affordable solution than current scheme.
- Bexhill-Hastings scheme permission given and Compulsory Purchase Orders underway.
- DAST well underway for W Sussex, London-Channel Ports and PUSH area.
- Work is being undertaken to look at access requirements for South East airports.
- Further expression of support for Crossrail-Reading enhancement and looking for Gatwick Airport – funding gap of £13m – looking at shortfall so scheme can progress.

Economic Development and Skills Board (update given by Cllr Mike Appleyard, the political lead member)

- Issues discussed: Regional Funding Advice; fast broadband in rural areas; transport infrastructure needs to be tackled as a high priority and support for low-carbon businesses. Although there was a broad consensus on the need to invest in skills in the region, there was a lack of detail on which skills should be a priority. Next meeting in February 2010.

6. Current Regional Strategy Preparation

Catriona Riddell updated the Plenary on the single Regional Strategy preparations which will combine both planning and economic development. Catriona explained the proposed timetable for the production of the Plan which will be much quicker than the timetable for the current South East Plan. The Partnership Board will be responsible for taking the Plan through to the Examination in Public, expected in mid 2012. Clearly current public and private sector funding pressures will be a significant issue in the Plan development

7. The Future Role of SEEC

(joint presentation by Paul Carter and George Beckett)

- SEEC established to present a coherent and cohesive voice for the region, to lobby national government to ensure that the South East is allocated a fairer distribution of infrastructure and service funding.
- Need to review long-term funding of SEEC to enable coming together on the big issues – transport, housing, economic development, waste disposal etc.
- If RDAs do disappear, what is role of the 74 local authorities in representing and forging better local relationships with businesses?
- Need to consider the impact of London issues – transport and waste for example – and develop strong ties with the GLA and Association of London Councils.
- Concerns that some councils do not grasp opportunities that can occur at the regional level. There is a need to persuade all councils to get involved. SEEC can represent local government on key issues to central government. If SEEC agrees on the principles of subsidiarity, decisions taken should only be of regional significance.

Chris Williams' presentation - future proofing the role of SEEC.

- Two key drivers identified, the General Election and Conservative Green Paper on Planning. Believes form follows function, so what role do we want SEEC to take? Role of SEEC to date is much more than formation of regional planning documents.
- Funding – contributions to SEEC amount to £150,000. The Partnership Board is currently £3.16m, which will be cut by 10% next year. SEEDA has a total budget of £140m of which approximately £6m are admin/staffing costs. Willingness to fund future activity may limit what SEEC can achieve.

Questions from the presentations

Andrew Bowles (Leader, Swale Borough Council). Expressed concern about the deficit in delivering rural affordable housing and need to deliver broadband in rural areas. 40/60% live in rural areas and 35% of businesses are based in rural areas. Andrew is leading a group on rural broadband on SE Rural Broadband; SEEDA has now removed its rural division so no SEEDA support for rural issues and GOSE have not renewed rural officer support. SEEC must make support of rural issues a top priority and embed the SE Rural Board or rural dimension will get sidelined. How strongly we set up SEEC and how firmly we set its boundaries; Andrew added that he spends a considerable amount of time talking to London authorities and Essex councils as his main contacts in terms of economic development, transport etc. SEEC must be flexible in working across boundaries for example, London and the East of England are crucial particularly for North Kent. A cohesive voice between the three regions is important particularly in being able to speak to the Government with one voice.

Louise Bloom said the relationship with London was key and there was an important need to ensure that London recognises the South East region in its plans. Paul Carter recognised the importance of this relationship and with the Eastern region as well.

Mike Appleyard, (Wycombe DC) Expressed concern that if tasking ourselves to work with London, we need to define terms of engagement with other bodies. We have tended to accept that leadership does that and report back; some of us would find it helpful to know what we are trying to achieve from that engagement including regional representation on sub-regional arrangements.

Ken Thornber – our purpose and scope is to be the unified voice of local government in the south east to central government; developing economically the SE; and to deliver these cost-effectively. The single biggest problem is attracting small businesses to rural areas because of the lack of broadband availability. There must be some form of recognition within SEEC about the importance of the rural economy. In terms of SEEC's future, consideration must be given to whether it operates on a basic or more comprehensive basis, for example undertaking lobbying on strategic issues on behalf of the South East could be done cost effectively.

Elizabeth Cartwright. Expressed concern about role of the HCA which does work alongside the RHRB. In addition there appears a lack of linkage between the HCA's objectives and SE Plan which has been signed off by Government. Need to maintain a strong focus on delivering affordable homes. May need pressure placed on rural areas and parish councils to deliver affordable housing.

David Tutt (Eastbourne) – broadband is also an issue for urban areas and therefore a need to promote broadband for the SE as a whole.

Barry Norton (Oxfordshire CC) – Vital that bottom-up decisions are made and that Councils are free to make their own representations to Government. SEEC needs to be the safety net to pick up strategic on behalf of SE councils. SEEC should caution against any imposition of central views.

Tony Page (Labour Leader, Reading) – Accepts that it will be difficult to make progress until we have had the Election. Need to focus on two givens – London; where we need to have a voice with London and the adjoining regions, central Government and associated structures and the need for some form of

regional entity that is likely to exist under any future Government. Therefore we need a strong SEEC to work both with Government and alongside a bottom-up approach through sub-regional arrangements.

Alex Samuels (Southampton) – SE region means little to his colleagues or the residents he represents. However, there are other issues such as airports, ports, motorway schemes etc where we must have influence. Don't feel able at this stage to commit, but will be involved pending the outcome of the next election.

Paul Carter - We could wait to see what is done to us or be a more proactive part of the debate. If SEEDA/PB isn't there in any future arrangements, we need to know what we need to do to fill a void if we believe that exists. A collective voice will be stronger than individual components especially given the fact that the SE region comprises of mainly Conservative councils with a likely Conservative administration coming in place.

Tony Reid, Deputy Leader, East Sussex CC - Need a forum of best practice for sharing views on service delivery, Total Place and providing a common view to central government. SEEC can effectively represent the views of over 8 million people.

Paul Watkins -We have done well to establish SEEC, however the future is unclear. We must be proactive and representative of the region otherwise, if we are not here when key decisions on regional issues including planning and transport, it will be done to us. SECL, SE Districts and unitary grouping will still exist, but we won't have a unified voice of local government across the region. SEEC is cross-party and cross-tier and represents the views of local government in general. There is a need for something and we will need to respond to central government's initiatives.

Paul Carter concluded the session saying it was important to start asking the difficult questions now and to continue the debate over the coming months.

9. SERFA - agreement of SEEC representative

Bill Bentley from East Sussex was nominated and duly elected as SEEC rep on the South East Regional Forum for Ageing. It was also agreed to seek a representative on the SE Forum on Farming Sustainability. Aidan Shutter to follow up.

Paul Watkins also added that a meeting will take place with GOSE and SEEDA after the January 2010 Leaders' Board meeting to scope range of EU programmes, schemes and funding streams. An update will be provided at the next Plenary meeting. It was also suggested that every year SEEC should review the usefulness of membership on external bodies.

10. Improvement and Efficiency South East

SEEC received a presentation from Paul Bettison. It was noted that every county now has a Member lead on IESE. In terms of keeping members informed it is important that:

- Members need to know whose these leads are.
- Communications are improved, particularly links to IESE website.

Paul Carter has also been given a place on the IESE Board as a SEEC representative.

11. Leaders' Board Consultation arrangements

SEEC considered a report on the requirements for consultation on interim leaders' Board arrangements following the enactment of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act. It was agreed that final arrangements be agreed by the Leaders' Board in January.

12. Venue for future Plenary meetings

It was agreed that a London venue was the most appropriate for SEEC representatives coming from across the South East region

Meeting Closed