

## Overview & Scrutiny Commission

### Task & Finish Group: Consultation Response to “The End of an EERA: What Future for Regional Local Government Arrangements in the East of England

#### Introduction

Proposals under the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill will see the abolition of regional assemblies including EERA with effect from April 2010. In their place an alternative model of regional governance has been proposed which would see the establishment of a Leaders Board to jointly develop a Single Regional Strategy bringing together both the Regional Spatial Strategy and the Regional Economic Strategy. The Bill also advocates the establishment of Regional Parliamentary Committees

EERA’s Sub National Review Members Task Group had devised the present consultation document which set out 13 questions. The deadline for receipt of responses is 8 May 2009.

At its meeting on 26 March 2009, the Overview & Scrutiny Commission agreed to set up a Task and Finish group to consider and formulate a response to the consultation document [Minute 32/09 (6) refers]. The Task and Finish Group consisted of Councillors Gordon Bambridge, Keith Martin and Pauline Quadling (the latter in place of Keith Gilbert who was unable to attend due to ill health), assisted by Mark Broughton, Member Development & Scrutiny Officer.

The Group attended a presentation from Jonathan Skinner, Executive Support Officer at East of England Regional Assembly (EERA), on 23 April 2009 entitled “Regional Local Government Arrangements – Now and in the Future”. Following the presentation the group met to discuss and consider a response to the consultation paper.

#### Consultation Response

Q1. Do you have any comments or observations about the SNR “offer” for responsibility for the new Single Regional Strategy to be a joint duty between the Regional Development Agency (EEDA) and a new Local Authorities Leaders Board?

A. Within the context of what could otherwise be a very complex arrangement, the suggested model shown by “Annex A” of the consultation document is broadly supportable as a way forward in recognising the harmonised working relationship between democratically elected leaders and EEDA stakeholders in delivering the new SRS. We also consider that it is essential that political balance in respect of the Leaders Board should be based on local, as opposed to national, circumstances.

Q2. Do you support the approach being proposed to use the SNR changes as an opportunity to undertake a review of all regional functions and services currently provided by EERA?

A. Broadly yes, however our view is that all regional functions provided by EERA should be retained (see response to Q.12).

Q3. Do you support the proposed composition of the statutorily prescribed Leaders' Board as set out in Annex A? Are there any different approaches for local authority representation or configuration you wish to be considered further for implementation? Does the model pay sufficient heed to the numbers and statutory functions of district councils, and are there any changes to the model, or alternative approaches you wish to put forward?

A. We feel that the proposed composition of the Leaders Board does not ensure fair and balanced representation from the district council level. In our opinion the Leaders Board should be elected from the ranks of the 52 local authorities represented, recognising also that the elections should be balanced to ensure that each area and tier (based on county/unitary lines) is granted fair representation. Given that district councils are the planning authority it is our view that the proposed distribution of seats covering the district level places too little merit and significance in the district tier and its statutory functions. The unfairness of the proposed model is exacerbated given the absence of unitary councils throughout the eastern region as a whole.

Q4. The Government's SNR model is somewhat unclear about the precise nature of the joint working arrangements between the Leaders' Board and EEDA when working as the "regional responsible authority", and where final decisions should be taken. Do you have a view on this important issue?

A. Elected representatives should have the prime role in decision making, recognising the legitimacy of public accountability.

Q5. Do you support the complementary concepts of (a) a statutorily prescribed Leaders' Board and (b) a discretionary wider regional grouping of all the principal councils in the East of England ("East of England Councils") as they have been presented in the model in Annex A? Is your council prepared to continue to pay a subscription to East of England Councils as a discretionary regional grouping of all of the local authorities in the region, on the same broad subscription scheme which local authorities currently pay to EERA for local government services?

A. In principle we support the model suggested in Annex A on this point. Our view, as a task and finish group, is that the Council should in principle continue to pay a subscription to East of England Councils continuing the present practice, however we would naturally defer to Cabinet for a decision in this matter.

Q6. Do you support the concept that the wider regional grouping of local authorities (“East of England Councils”) should recognise “top up” members from under represented political groups to ensure a more balanced representation than would be achieved by just including council leaders, and if so what top up percentage of members would you suggest?

A. This is a very difficult question to answer but on balance our view is that the concept of “top up” is not supported as the political balance and the electoral system is the single most important arbiter of local political representation.

Q7. Do you agree with the suggested approach that recognised regional political group leaders would have an ex –officio place on the Leaders’ Board, provided they are also council leaders?

A. Yes, on the assumption that they would possess no voting powers.

Q8. Do you have a view about whether stakeholder interests and key regional agencies should participate directly in the work of any SRS Joint Board and, if they do, whether they should be part of any formal decision making processes on the content of the SRS?

A. Our view is that such stakeholder interests and key regional agencies should be encouraged to participate in debate (e.g. as expert witnesses) but that the board alone (comprised 10 members drawn equally from the EEDA Board and Leaders’ Board) should actually have decision-making powers.

Q9. Do you have a view about the nature of any executive support/staffing arrangements to support the work of the Leaders’ Board/East of England Councils, and particularly when the Leaders Board is working with EEDA on the Single Regional Strategy as the regional responsible authority? How important is it for the Leaders’ Board/East of England Councils to have its own separate and independent advisory structures, and how should these best be organised?

A. We note the staff structures suggested in Annex A and are broadly supportive of this arrangement. Thus we support a regional staff broadly similar in terms of numbers as are employed at present in supporting the work of the new regional organisation.

Q10. Taking everything into account do you support the model referred to in Annex A as a reasonable way forward for local authorities in the East of England? Do you have any alternative “SNR compliant” model you wish to be considered further for implementation?

A. Except where indicated to the contrary above, Annex A represents a solution which is broadly acceptable but fails to recognise pertinent concerns e.g. over safeguarding commensurate representation from district councils.

Q11. Are you content that decisions on setting up future regional local government arrangements can be taken within EERA's existing processes, recognising EERA's current role as the Regional LGA? If not, what alternative processes would you suggest?

A. Yes we recognise and concur with the view that existing processes used by EERA work well and should be transferred over to the new regional governance arrangements.

Q12. Do you value/support the continued provision of these (individual) services and functions at regional level? Should provision for these services and functions be made within any new regional governance arrangements for local authorities being set up to respond to SNR changes? If not, what alternative arrangements would you suggest?

A. We support the retention of all these services and functions as presently provided within the regional framework.

Q13. Do you have any further observations on matters raised in this consultation document that you wish to make?

A. We are concerned that the proposed changes, whilst representing a positive attempt to effect a worthy successor organisation to EERA, will in fact potentially erode the democratic mandate for regional government in the East of England. At the same time we recognise the importance of there being widespread buy-in from councils throughout the East of England in a workable replacement model and thus in effect Annex A represents a reasonable compromise approach.

Cllr G Bambridge  
Cllr K Martin  
Cllr P Quadling

24 April 2009