Purpose of the Report

- This report, which was presented and discussed at the EEDET Board meeting on 19th November, sets out proposals for continuing with the East of England Regional Transport Forum for a further year.

Summary of Recommendations

1. That the present RTF should continue for a further year in a transition phase as there is strong support for Members and senior Officers to meet.

2. That the frequency of meetings during the transition period should drop to every 4 months.

3. That one authority should continue to act as the Secretariat, pulling together the agenda, commissioning papers, writing the minutes, chairing the RTF meeting and leading STSG. Southend on Sea Borough Council is prepared to continue in this role if RTF Members are supportive of this proposal.

4. It is proposed that the credit remaining from previous year annual levy contributions should be used to assist in funding for the Secretariat during the transition year.

5. It is proposed that the venue for future meetings following the December 2010 RTF and the costs associated with those meetings, including the linked STSG meetings should be shared out between all authorities on a rotation basis starting with those authorities that have not acted as Secretariat to date.

6. That the membership for the time being should continue to be the 11 shire and unitary authorities of the East of England together with national and regional government organisations (that remain) that have a managing responsibility in transport. Any emerging new sub-national transport forums will have to consider their own membership criteria based on their own terms of reference. Should circumstances change then a further report and recommendations will be brought to the RTF.

1. Introduction

1.1 This report has been prepared following a request at the EEDET meeting in July 2010 to assist members of EEDET to consider the future role and management of the Regional Transport Forum (RTF). The report was discussed and approved by EEDET on 19th November.

1.2 At the 25th June RTF there were also discussions on the future role of the RTF. Members of RTF at the meeting confirmed that they thought RTF was useful as there were many schemes, road, rail and air that need cross-boundary discussions/sharing of information and decisions. It was felt that the East of England needed a lobbying voice, especially as it is an area of high economic influence. There was a unanimous decision at the meeting that the RTF should continue in
some form. A letter was sent to Norman Baker, the Minister for Transport, outlining the RTF’s views and a reply was received confirming support for such a grouping.

1.3 At the 10th September RTF a paper was presented outlining the changing scene of sub-national Government. This covered the abolition of EERA, EEDA and the Government Office, the announcement of a Regional Growth Fund starting April 2011, and the emerging proposals for Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP’s). There was a further discussion on the possible future relationship between any RTF and the LEP’s but most Members at the time felt such a discussion was premature as Government had yet to articulate which LEP proposals it would accept and their subsequent powers and responsibilities.

1.4 Proposals for LEP’s were submitted to Government on 6th September. Six proposals covered the East of England ranging from an extensive LEP for Greater Essex and Kent to a single county LEP for Norfolk. Between the six LEP proposals there was some overlap, for example the district of King’s Lynn and West Norfolk gave support to being included in 3 LEP’s (Norfolk, Greater Cambridge & Greater Peterborough, and East Anglia). Government indicated that it would respond to the LEP proposals with the publication of a White Paper on Local Growth.

1.5 The White Paper “Local Growth: realising every place’s potential” was published on 28th October 2010. 24 LEP’s across the country have been invited to progress and set up their boards. For the East of England, 4 LEP’s are included in the list: Greater Cambridge & Greater Peterborough, South East Midlands, Hertfordshire, and Kent, Greater Essex and East Sussex. For those areas not covered by the list on-going discussions are taking place and further proposals will be submitted to Government in due course. It is understood that Norfolk and Suffolk have now submitted a joint LEP proposal entitled ‘New Anglia’.

1.6 The White Paper also set out the timetable and criteria for the newly launched Regional Growth Fund (RGF). This fund will provide £1.4b of focused investment over 3 years starting in 2011/12. First round bids for funding are to be submitted by 21st January 2011, with bids coming from private bodies or public private partnerships (such as LEP’s).

2. Shape of a future Regional Transport Forum

2.1 It is widely accepted that the existing Regional Transport Forum has been a success and that it responded in a positive way to the previous Government’s requests for regional advice. But with the arrival of the new Coalition Government the context within which the RTF operates has changed:-

- The regional tier of Government has been abolished
- The Regional Spatial Strategy has been withdrawn and Government has indicated there is no role for regional planning
- The Regional Funding Allocation process has been suspended and therefore no funding prioritisation decision is required
- Government does not now recognise the previous regional geography

2.2 It is also clear that the emerging proposals for Local Enterprise Partnerships should have a key bearing on the form and shape of any future Regional Transport Forum or sub-national transport body. Government has indicated that Transport will feature amongst the powers and responsibilities of the LEP’s and the Department for Transport (DfT) has said that it hopes to continue with some form of Regional Funding Advice type system and that these could be channelled through the LEP’s. The recent Transport Statement following the Spending Review confirmed that DfT expect a more bottom-up approach with LEP’s playing a key role over strategic investment choices in functional economic areas. Therefore it would seem essential
that any future RTF is structured around the final LEP geography.

2.3 It is agreed that whatever the future role and responsibilities of LEP’s, there is merit in Local Authorities working together in a collective way to:-

- Pursue cross-boundary issues that affect more than one authority
- Support and lobby as a group for major schemes
- Respond to EU & DfT consultations across a wide range of issues
- Receive new DfT policy initiatives
- Communicate with national organisations such as Highways Agency, Network Rail
- Share best practice and knowledge

2.4 The proposals for LEP’s give a clear indication that the geography of the old East of England is changing. Local Authorities are forming different alliances with different neighbours where there may be greater synergies. Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Luton are strengthening their links westwards by joining Milton Keynes and parts of Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire in the South Midlands LEP. Essex, Thurrock and Southend have joined Kent in a Greater Essex & Kent LEP (with East Sussex subsequently joining), and the Greater Cambridge & Greater Peterborough LEP also includes Rutland.

2.5 The abolition of the East of England regional bodies and structure has been accompanied by a resurgence of interest by Local Authorities in national bodies and organisations such as ADEPT (Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport). This body, recently rebranded from the County Surveyors Society, offers the opportunity for officers of Local Authorities to network, lobby and tackle common issues through a number of committees and working groups. With the abandonment of regionalism, this body could fulfil part of the role previously undertaken by the RTF. However, although it does provide a forum for Chief Officers to meet, it doesn’t do the same for Council Members / Transport Portfolio Holders, which was one of the main benefits of the RTF.

2.6 If DfT support some form of Regional Funding Advice type system (but to be called something different) and expect to channel this through LEP’s then it follows that the LEP geography will steer a re-shaping of the boundary and membership of any sub-national transport forum or forums. Depending on which LEP’s are approved and their geographical coverage, some form of strategic consortia of LEP’s may be appropriate to address transport challenges. Local Authorities in the East of England may then re-group differently into one or more new sub-national transport forums.

2.7 At the moment the situation is not clear and therefore it would not be appropriate to make a decision now. It is far better to wait until some clarity, particularly over LEP’s, emerges. In the meantime, the existing RTF should continue during this transition period.

2.8 It is therefore suggested that for the time being the Regional Transport Forum continues in its present shape for another year (up to March 2012). This will allow time for proposals on LEP’s to emerge and for the possibility of new sub-national transport structures based on the geography of LEP’s or consortia of LEP’s to evolve.

3. Business of a future Regional Transport Forum

3.1 Up to now the RTF has had an important role in responding to Government requests for advice on the prioritisation of major schemes and on the allocation of funding from the RFA. It had a decision-making role in addition to being a forum for discussion and best practice sharing. It was this funding decision-making role that
interested most participants, as evidenced by the higher attendance at meetings when key decisions had to be made. Whether such a role continues into the future depends on how the Department for Transport proposes to prioritise and allocate funding to major schemes.

3.2 If sub-national transport forums are to exist they must have a focus and a need to meet. Although there is merit in Members and Chief Officers meeting on a regular basis, if it is just networking and sharing ideas, there is a fear that attendance will soon dwindle. The forum needs to be more than a talking shop. The most important role is clearly funding decision-making and this depends on DfT, but in addition to this other possible roles could include:

- Presentations and discussion centred around the attendance of recognised National Experts in key fields
- Presentations and discussion centred around the attendance of Senior Executives from leading transport operators or companies
- The attendance of Senior Civil Servants from DfT and other Government Departments
- The attendance of the Secretary of State for Transport or other Ministers of Transport.
- Discussion and support for improvements to key corridors (each meeting could be focussed on a specific corridor)
- Working to seek innovative ways of financing new major schemes (e.g. pursuing Tax Incremental Financing initiatives between authority areas)

3.3 With the Department for Transport indicating that they are keen that some form of regional or sub-national funding advice process continues, albeit with a different name, and that this may come through the LEP’s there will be business for sub-national transport forums. The Highways Agency have indicated that they value the opportunity to meet with Local Authorities together so that consistent messages can be given. Problems and issues in one area can also be shared with those responsible for other areas leading to greater understanding. Network Rail have voiced similar views, in particular citing the benefit of engaging at a sub-national level on rail capacity studies.

3.4 Prior to about 2003, each year the Secretary of State for Transport did visit each region to hear views and opinions from Local Authority Members in a single forum. This ceased when Ministers felt the event became less of a discussion and more of a lobbying exercise. In recent years we have struggled to secure any Ministerial attendance at the RTF, but with emerging LEP’s and new sub-national transport structures there will hopefully be a new opportunity to engage with Ministers.

3.5 Although much of the organisation of the business of the Regional Transport Forum in terms of setting the agenda and deciding areas for discussion was delegated down to STSG (Strategic Transport Sub-Group), the actual mechanics of producing papers and managing the regional funding allocation budget was undertaken by the Regional Assembly with support from the Development Agency and the Government Office. With all these bodies having been abolished or being abolished this work will fall to individual Local Authorities. This has started to happen and will have to continue.

4. Management of a future Regional Transport Forum

4.1 To date, the management of the Regional Transport Forum has been carried out by a single Local Authority willing to take on this role for a two year term. This started with Hertfordshire County Council (April 2005-March 2007), was followed by Suffolk County Council (April 2007-March 2009) and currently resides with Southend Borough Council (April 2009- March 2011). The managing Local Authority fulfils the
following duties:-

- Provides the Secretariat to organise and fund the meetings of the Regional Transport Forum
- Hosts the Regional Transport Forum
- Transport Portfolio Holder chairs the Regional Transport Forum
- Organises, hosts, chairs and funds the Officer led Strategic Transport Sub-Group
- Represents the Regional Transport Forum on a number of regional working groups (e.g. DaSTS Steering Group)

4.2 All the above activities are largely funded by the managing Local Authority. The annual levy (currently £6000 for shire authorities and £3000 for unitary authorities) is primarily used to fund research projects and consultancy studies that have been undertaken on behalf of the RTF.

4.3 If the Regional Transport Forum continues for a further year through the transitional period, as is suggested, then decisions need to be made on:-

- Who fulfils the role of the Local Authority taking over the Secretariat and RTF Chairing function?
- Who hosts the RTF meetings and funds the provision of venue and other associated costs e.g. lunch, support facilities?
- The number of RTF meetings per year?

4.4 Taking each question in turn, one possible option is for authorities to take-it-in-turn with the role of Secretariat and all that goes with it being shared out. This is probably unworkable as it would be difficult to organise the transition from one authority to another in such a short period of time. We are therefore left with a single managing authority taking on the role of Secretariat for the transition year. Two options exist for this; either a new authority comes forward and offers to take over the role, or Southend agrees to continue for a further year. From the experience of the three previous occasions when an authority has commenced the role, it seems to take about 6 months to establish an effective secretariat. For a transition period of 1 year this would seem to be a tall order for a new authority, but someone may come forward and offer. The most practical option is for Southend to continue for a further year if willing.

4.5 Whatever the outcome agreed by EEDET members, consideration will need to be given how costs can be further shared and minimised between Authorities. The hosting of RTF meetings, the costs that go with this, does seem to be one option that could be shared out between Authorities. It is known that some Members do struggle with meetings that are held at the extremities of the region which is why the majority of meetings under the auspices of Southend have actually been held in Chelmsford. Sharing hosting around the region would even-out the travelling for all as well as sharing the cost burden.

4.6 It is therefore suggested that following the December 2010 RTF meeting in Chelmsford, responsibility for venue hosting rotates between Local Authorities. This seems to be the most equitable arrangement as the majority of authorities will then get the chance to host a meeting at a venue of their choice and the costs of this are then shared around. It is suggested that a list is drawn up by STSG of the rotation with those authorities that have already had a two year stint of being the Secretariat placed at the end of the list.

4.7 As already indicated, in addition to the RTF meetings, the current Secretariat also hosts STSG meetings, of which there are typically two associated with any RTF meeting – one before to agree the agenda and papers, and one after to arrange the
actions. Again, for the transition period it is suggested that the RTF hosting authority also hosts the associated STSG meetings.

4.8 There remains the issue of the number of RTF meetings that take place in the transition year. To date there are 4 meetings per year. To maintain this level during a period of transition when the business of RTF is unclear and proposals for LEP’s are emerging seems unnecessary. Dropping down to only 2 per year would seem somewhat symbolic and would probably hasten any future demise. EEDET members views are therefore welcomed on a proposal that, during this period of uncertainty, the number of meetings in the transition year drops down to 3 following the December RTF, with a suggestion that meetings could take place in March, July and November 2011, to avoid the August holidays.

4.9 Finally it is possible that during the transition year proposals for LEP’s do not emerge as anticipated, or the White Paper on sub-national economic growth does not give them any role on transport, or EEDET Members feel that they wish to continue with the existing regional grouping to discuss and decide cross-boundary transport issues. The transition year does allow for such considerations and the new arrangements that are put in place for the rotation of venue hosting could continue. If the RTF did continue beyond the transition year the main issue that would arise would again be the role, responsibilities and funding of the Secretariat. In this situation the options would seem to be either, continue with one authority taking on that role for 2 years as before, or collectively all authorities funding a permanent secretary who is employed for the sole purpose of administering the RTF.

5. Membership of a future Regional Transport Forum

5.1 To date membership of the RTF has comprised the 11 shire and unitary authorities of the East of England, who all have full voting rights, together with permanent open invitations to the Department for Transport, Highways Agency, Network Rail, East of England Regional Assembly (as was), East of England Development Agency and the Government Office for the East of England who all had observer status. Other organisations, such as the Train Operating Companies or Sustrans, the cycling charity, where invited to attend as and when required.

5.2 To some regional groups, most notably the environmental sector led by STEER (Sustainable Transport in the East of England Region) the RTF has often been viewed as a ‘bit of a club’ to which they have been excluded. They have frequently called for membership to be widened, a view also expressed by the business community led by the East of England Business Group (an umbrella organisation covering the Chambers of Commerce, Institute of Directors etc). In the past, both STEER and EEBG were included in various groups that were pulling together the Regional Spatial Strategy and it probably stems from this that they felt excluded when the RTF was formed. On the other hand, the RTF was set up as a forum for the local transport authorities to respond to ‘the asks’ of the previous Government and therefore quite rightly membership was only for organisations that had a managing responsibility for transport.

5.3 The Coalition Government has indicated that LEP’s should be a partnership between local Government and business, and that wherever possible LEP’s should be chaired by the business community. This, together with the abolition of EEDA and GO-East, suggests that membership of future sub-national transport forums will be different from the current RTF. If, as is suggested in this paper that new sub-national transport forums do emerge based on LEP geographies, then it is for those new forums to determine their own membership criteria. For the time being, as the RTF continues in the transition period, membership should remain as it currently is.

6. Financing a future Regional Transport Forum
6.1 As already discussed, at present the managing Authority funds the secretariat role through the time of its own staff and also funds the hosting of meetings through venue hire and the provision of lunch. If it is agreed that for the transition period the hosting role is shared out, with any costs associated with that function picked up by the hosting authority, then there remains the cost associated with the Secretariat.

6.2 Again, as already discussed, the annual levy is currently used to fund research projects and consultancy work. Hertfordshire County Council act as banker of this fund and there remains about £50,500 in credit. Some of this (about £30,000) was earmarked for a regional contribution to phase 2 of the DaSTS studies that the previous Government had indicated would be necessary to match any DfT contribution. At the current moment it looks doubtful that any DaSTS studies will continue.

6.3 With a healthy balance in the bank, EEDET have considered and agreed that the annual levy for 2010/11 is waived. And with little need to keep funds for any immediate consultancy work, the fund that has already accumulated could be used to help offset the financial burden that the managing authority has to bear in administration and secretarial duties. EEDET Members have considered whether this fund could be used to support the Secretariat during the transition period and the mechanism to identify the sum involved. Southend Borough Council, as current Secretariat, will specify the staff costs associated with administering the RTF in the current financial year.

7. Summary of Recommendations

7.1 With the abandonment of regional structures there seems little point in holding onto a Regional Transport Forum based on the East of England geography. Emerging LEP proposals are already generating new alliances and some authorities are looking in different directions. The role and responsibilities of LEP’s remain unclear but is likely they will have some transport function and with this will come new sub-national transport structures. Until these structures emerge the present RTF should continue for a further year in a transition phase as there is strong support for Members and senior Officers to meet.

7.2 With less focus on the need for decision making on funding, the RTF should continue to provide a forum for authorities to discuss common issues and to make common representation to Government. The forum should also be used to receive presentations from eminent national experts, senior DfT officials and even Government Ministers if possible. But the frequency of meetings during the transition period should drop to every 4 months.

7.3 One authority should continue to act as the Secretariat, pulling together the agenda, commissioning papers, writing the minutes, chairing the RTF meeting and leading STSG. EEDET Members have agreed that this should be Southend Borough Council. Members also agreed that costs should be minimised and better shared between authorities and that the credit that remains from previous year annual levy contributions could be used to help fund the Secretariat during the transition year.

7.4 The venue for future meetings following the December 2010 RTF and the costs associated with those meetings, including the linked STSG meetings should be shared out between all authorities on a rotation basis starting with those authorities that have not acted as Secretariat to date.

7.5 Membership for the time being should continue to be the 11 shire and unitary authorities of the East of England together with national and regional government organisations (that remain) that have a managing responsibility in transport. Any emerging new sub-national transport forums will have to consider their own
membership criteria based on their own terms of reference.

7.6 The transition period of 1 year should allow sufficient time for new sub-national transport structures to emerge probably on the back of proposals for LEP’s or consortia of LEP’s. The geography of these new sub-national forums should emerge naturally with no rigidity in attempting to remain fixed to the East of England regional geography. If new sub-national transport forums do not emerge as anticipated, then RTF could continue beyond the transition year but again the question of the Secretariat and its funding will need to be addressed.

Chair of EEDET: Andrew Lewis

Presented to EEDET on 19 November 2010