

Kent County Council

Select Committee Review

**South East England
Regional Assembly**

Winter 2002/3

Outline

In June 2002 Kent County Council established a Select Committee to consider the effectiveness of the Regional Assembly. Its terms of reference were

- 1) to assess the Role and Effectiveness for Kent of the South East Regional Assembly, together with achievements of SEERA since its establishment; in particular the added value the Assembly has brought to the people of Kent and how this has contributed to their well-being; and
- (2) to assess how the policies and actions for SEERA have addressed the need to re-balance the economy of the South East.

The Committee of 7 KCC Councillors agreed that their review would include a series of visits to observe the Assembly's procedures at first hand. During the late summer and autumn of 2002 the Committee observed an Assembly Plenary Session in Brighton, a meeting of the Regional Planning Committee and a meeting of the Assembly's Executive Committee. Alongside these visits the Committee held a series of hearings where they spoke to KCC officers who take part in the Assembly's Advisory groups, Assembly officers, representatives from GOSE and SEEDA, and Assembly members (a full list of witnesses is available in the appendices).

The report refers to 'the Assembly' or the 'Regional Assembly' throughout (except where a direct quote is used). The Committee recognises the point, made by the Assembly's Chief Executive, Paul Bevan, that the acronym SEERA is too easily confused with SEEDA and does not describe the Assembly's function.

The Committee has not sought to make recommendations. Conclusions have been included as a complement to the fuller discussion in the report. The report takes a dialectic approach that seeks to give full recognition to the opinions that were expressed to the Committee in their evidence gathering.

Section One of this report serves as a general introduction to the topic, and identifies how the Assembly has evolved, the boundaries of the region and how the Assembly and the other regional partners describe themselves. This section also gives an illustration of the regional imbalances referred to in the terms of reference.

Section Two moves on to a fuller discussion of the key issues that the Committee considered. This section features an ongoing debate over the role of the Assembly and the way that it meets its objectives.

Finally in Section Three the Committee identify their Conclusions.

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Section One

1.1 Introduction

1.1:1 The Committee's consideration of the effectiveness of the Regional Assembly takes place against a backdrop of an evolving debate on regional governance. The Assembly itself has only been in existence since 1999, taking on the role of Regional Planning body in April 2001. Shortly before the Select Committee was formed the Government published the White Paper "Your Region, Your Choice" outlining its' vision for developing regional governance in England.

1.1:2 The relative newness of the Assembly and the evolving national context has had a number of implications for the review. Some witnesses have indicated that it is simply too early to measure the impact of regional policy; furthermore the Assembly is not an executive agency and as such is dependent on cultivating the co-operation of its members and other agencies to implement policy. In addition to this the Assembly is still working through the transition from central government control of planning guidance to regional control. This process will not be complete until it co-ordinates a new approach to spatial planning at a regional level rather than, as now, interpreting and developing the guidelines identified by Government. It should be noted that only directly elected assemblies would in due course have the devolved power to approve their regional spatial strategy. Finally the White Paper creates further potential for substantive change.

1.1:3 The Committee's terms of reference preclude an investigation of what might be, or even what will be; instead the Committee have looked at what the Assembly is now, and what it does. Defining what the Assembly is and how roles and responsibilities are divided between the three partners in regional administration, GOSE, SEEDA and the Assembly, has been an important part of this review. The Committee has also looked at the way the Assembly functions; the way that Members' views are represented and how policy is developed.

1.1:4 The Assembly's core function (alongside being the accountable body for SEEDA), since April 2001 is to co-ordinate and develop regional spatial planning. Many of its outputs, the regional strategies, are concerned with issues such as transport, housing, land use, and the spatial planning aspects of issues such as tourism and energy efficiency. These policy areas are closely bound up with economic development and the Assembly has input into the Regional Economic Strategy that is developed by SEEDA. Finally the Assembly has a position on such diverse issues as health and social exclusion particularly where these "cross-cutting" themes have a bearing on planning. The report will consider the most relevant aspects of the regional strategies and assess how well the needs of Kent have been met.

1.1:5 It will first be necessary to establish the context within which the Assembly has developed. The report will include a summary of the Assembly's evolution and will also include a summary of the roles of the three main regional agencies (SEEDA, the Assembly and GOSE). The report will then go on to outline the previous arrangements for the co-ordination of regional planning that the Assembly superseded.

1.1:6 Having established a context the report will give an overview of regional economic imbalance. This overview will highlight likely areas that will need to be assessed in the main report such as East Kent, Kent as a rural County, Thames Gateway, transport, and housing.

1.1:7 Having established what the Assembly is and what it does and then moved on to outline the particular issues that are important to Kent the report will then look at the issues that were raised during the review.

1.2 Background

1.2:1 When compared to the structures of local government, with its customs and practices that have evolved over decades the Assembly is still developing and defining its place within the region. Much of the evidence given to the Committee has been qualified with a note of caution that it is too early to clearly identify the Assembly's influence.

1.2:2 In its three years of existence the Assembly has developed regional policies in many areas. Regional planning and transport policy has been operating within a framework and time-scale already laid out in RPG9. In the future it is likely that regional agencies will have a greater role in identifying and shaping regional priorities. Mike Gwilliam (Director of Planning at the Assembly) told the Committee that as the Assembly takes more responsibility for planning it will adopt a more holistic, approach to spatial planning. Therefore an integrated approach, that considers the wider implications of planning and transport decisions will complement the regional, strategic focus.

1.2:3 The Assembly was established in 1999. This followed the 1997 Partnerships for Prosperity White Paper and the 1998 Regional Development Agencies Act. These led to the establishment of the Regional Development Agencies (RDA's) but also recognised the democratic deficit that business led 'quangos' were perceived to create. The guidance from the RDA Act – which was more concerned with the Development Agencies than with Assemblies – indicated that the RDA's should be accountable to a regional assembly.

Part 1, subsection 8 - "Regional Consultation, and sub-section 18 - Regional Accountability of the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998:-

(1) "If the Secretary of State is of the opinion:-

- (a) that there is a body which is representative of those in a regional development agency's area with an interest in its work, and
 - (b) that the body is suitable to be given the role of regional chamber for the agency,
- he may by directions to the agency designate the body as the regional chamber for the agency."

And:-

18 - "(1) The Secretary of State may by directions require a regional development agency for which there is a regional chamber under section 8(1):-

- (a) to supply the chamber with information of such description as may be specified in the directions,
- (b) to answer questions put by the chamber about information supplied to it by the agency and to do so in such manner as may be so specified, and
- (c) to take such other steps for the purpose of accounting to the chamber for the exercise of its functions as may be so specified."

This indicates that Assemblies were initially set up to monitor and hold RDA's accountable. SEEDA is financially independent of the Assembly and has a direct relationship to Government and the ODPM. The 1998 RDA Act outlined an interface based on accountability however as the Assembly co-ordinates regional planning the relationship is now more complex. Decisions on planning and transport have a direct impact on economic development. Before looking at this issue in greater detail it is first necessary to outline the roles of the three regional bodies the Assembly, SEEDA, and GOSE.

1.3 Regional Agencies

1.3:1 The 1998 Act led to the development of the triumvirate of regional agencies engaged in regional governance in the South East, the Government Office (GOSE), the RDA (SEEDA) and the Assembly. This model is not prescribed and other regions do not necessarily share the same structure or division of responsibilities.

1.3:2 This next section, taken from "Working Together for South East England" (an information leaflet jointly produced by the three regional agencies) outlines the roles of the three regional bodies.

1.3:3 "**GOSE** - provides an important link between the region and central government. It promotes government policy and takes forward a wide range of government programmes and initiatives in the region. It also ensures that Ministers are aware of local and regional issues when making decisions. GOSE staff unlike those in the other two organisations are civil servants who through their Regional Director report to central government departments.

1.3:4 **SEEDA** - takes the strategic lead in promoting sustainable economic development of the region. SEEDA's 15 board members are appointed by the Government but have a large degree of independence in determining the Agency's priorities. It is a business led organisation but also has members with backgrounds in local government, the voluntary sector, trade unions and academia. On behalf of the region SEEDA leads on preparing the Regional Economic Strategy. SEEDA also works with its regional and local partners to deliver a wide range of economic development and regeneration initiatives for business learning and skills, regeneration and sustainable development.

1.3:5 **Regional Assembly** - is the representative voice of the region. It is made up of 111 members. They include elected councillors chosen by local authorities and people from the voluntary sector, environmental sector, faith groups, the world of

business and education, the arts, and local communities. The Assembly has responsibility at the regional level for land-use and transport planning. It also has an important role in providing regional accountability for SEEDA and is a sounding board for other government agencies.”

1.3:6 This summary shows the degree of overlap and cross responsibilities and gives an overview of the roles of each of the regional partners. The role of local authorities in developing and implementing policy at a local level is not included in the “Working Together” leaflet. However, Paul Bevan (Assembly Chief Executive) told the Committee that he recognises the crucial element of partnership between the Assembly and local authorities:-

“Our task is to demonstrate a model of regional governance that is inclusive, is based on partnership and doesn’t jeopardise or challenge the existing structures and relationships. But is inclusive of stakeholders and actually makes a difference because I think the thing that it really offers local authorities in particular is strategic distance. It enables local authorities not to just leave things to the Government or the Government Office like housing numbers, or location of incinerators or what have you. It enables [us] collectively to have a body that can make those sorts of decisions and more openly and inclusively, the greater legitimacy that we can have in making those decisions I think the more difficulty the Government will have in over-turning them or ignoring them.”

The relationship between what the Assembly can do and the role of local authorities and what the former can add to the latter has been an important area for debate.

1.4 The Assembly, Members and Committees

1.4:1 The Assembly is not directly elected. There are 111 members including 74 local councillors from the local authorities, districts, and unitary boroughs, and 34 representatives from the voluntary sector, faith groups, business, and education and plus an additional 3 seats for town and parish councils. The additional 34 stakeholder representatives were invited by SERF (South East Regional Forum) a local authority body, to nominate representatives to join the 77 councillors when the Assembly was first set up.

The full assembly meets three times a year. Members of the Select Committee attended a full meeting of the Assembly in Brighton as observers.

1.4:2 The Executive Committee meets eight times per year. The executive committee consists of:-

- the Chair of the Assembly;
- 5 Vice Chairs: 3 from local government, 2 from social, economic and environmental partners;
- 21 Executive Members: 13 from local government, 8 from social, economic and environmental partners.

1.4:3 The Assembly also has a standing Planning Committee that meets regularly through the year to monitor and discuss planning issues and advises the Assembly on planning and transport issues. In addition to this there are a variety of opportunities that the Assembly has to enable Members to engage with policy development or fulfil the Assembly's scrutiny responsibilities. The Assembly regularly holds workshops and seminars to look at policy development, there have been Select Committees set up to consider particular issues and scrutinise SEEDA, and recently the Assembly has co-ordinated a Regional Health Forum.

1.4:4 The Assembly identifies its own objectives as:-

- **“Providing a strong**, credible voice for the South East - developing the region's identity and pressing its interests in Westminster and Brussels
- **Holding to account**, and working in partnership with, the Regional Development Agency
- **Developing and managing** the South East's relations with London and other neighbouring regions
- **Through our local authority** and other stakeholder members, representing, and being representative of, the region's diverse communities
- **Providing** an effective regional forum for sharing views, experience and best practice, for building consensus, and for developing policy where it is needed at a regional level
- **Adopting** the role of regional planning body in advising the Government on planning and transport strategies for the South East”

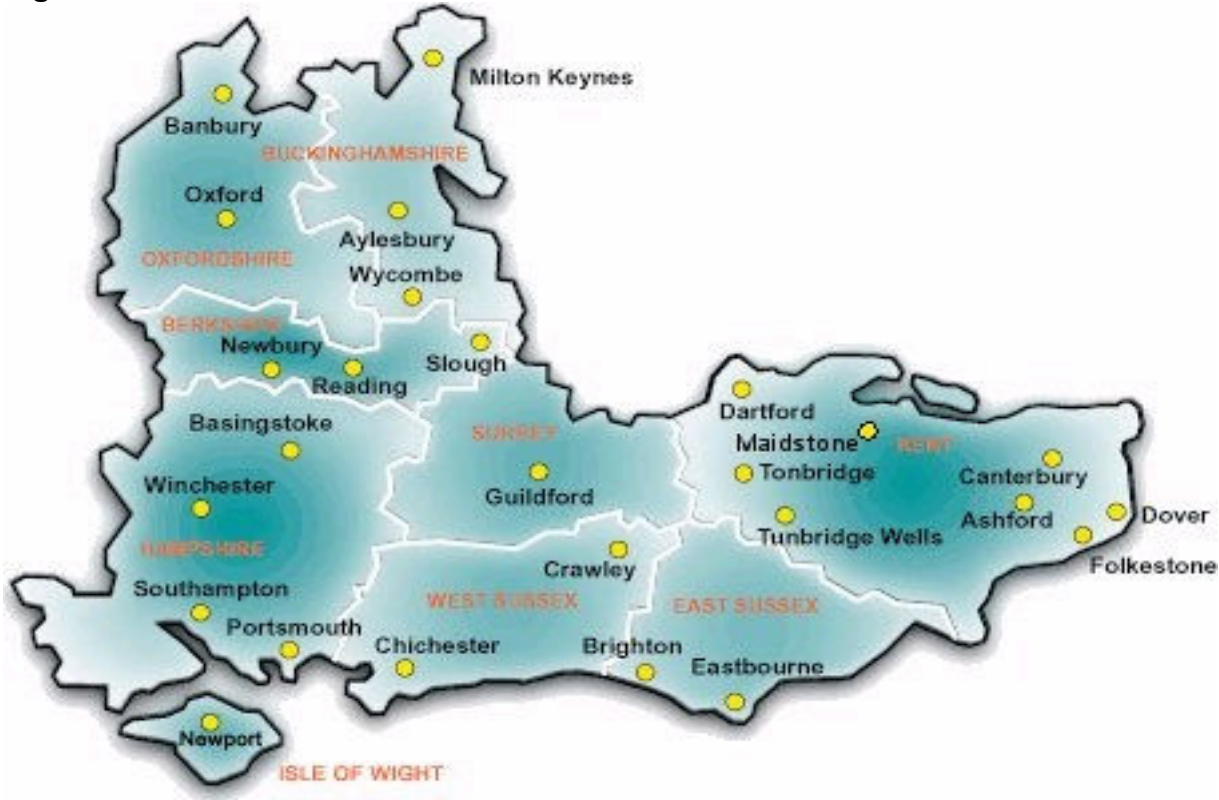
http://www.southeast-ra.gov.uk/the_assembly/vision_role.html

1.5 The Region

1.5:1 The South East region covers an area bordering London to the South and West and extending from Milton Keynes and Oxford in the North of the region to Ramsgate in the East. The attached map of the region (fig 1) illustrates the scale of the region and its main towns. The boundaries and parts of the English regions were laid out in Schedule 1 of the 1998 RDA Act.

“The counties of Buckinghamshire, East Sussex, Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Kent, Oxfordshire, Surrey and West Sussex The non-metropolitan districts of Bracknell Forest, Brighton and Hove, the Medway Towns, Milton Keynes, Portsmouth, Reading, Slough, Southampton, West Berkshire, Windsor and Maidenhead and Wokingham” (Regional Development Agencies Act 1998 Chapter 45 - *continued* Schedules, Schedule 1 Regions)

Fig 1



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1.6 East/West Imbalances

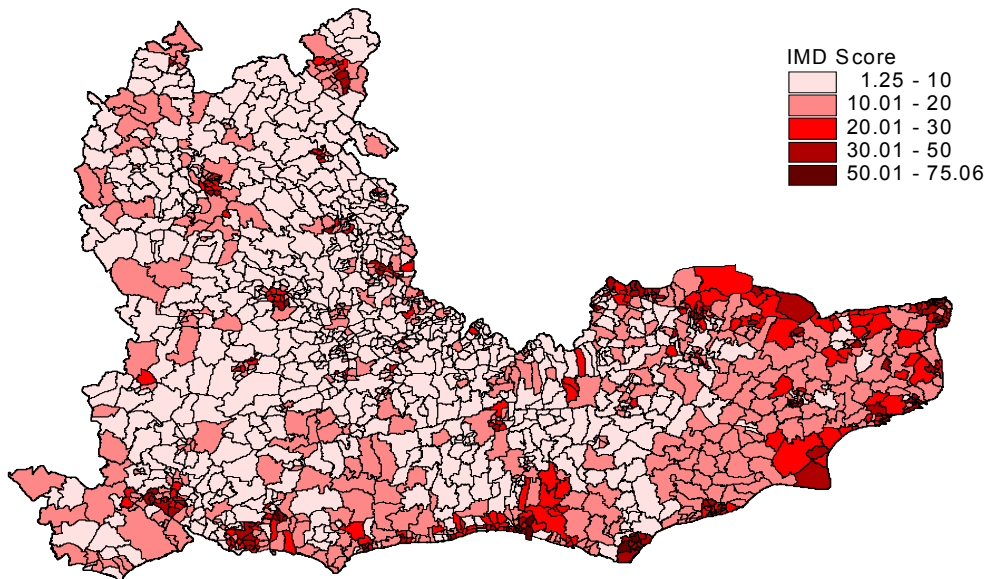
1.6:1 The particular issues affecting Kent and regional imbalances are best summarised in these charts. The West of the region, in particular the Thames Valley and the M4 Corridor has become a base for high-tech employers attracted by the proximity of London and international travel from Heathrow. Meanwhile in the East and Coastal areas of the region unemployment levels are higher, wards with higher indicators of multiple deprivation are more numerous, and new businesses are more difficult to attract.

RPG 9 recognises that there is need to re-balance the regional economy with a higher proportion of investment shifting from West to East. The Assembly operates within this framework. This issue receives broad recognition in the Assembly's strategies; the Committee has looked at the detail beneath this recognition to establish whether or not regional imbalances are being addressed.

Figures 2, 3 and 4 (below) give some indication of the regional economic imbalances.

Fig 2

Index of Multiple Deprivation 2000: GOSE



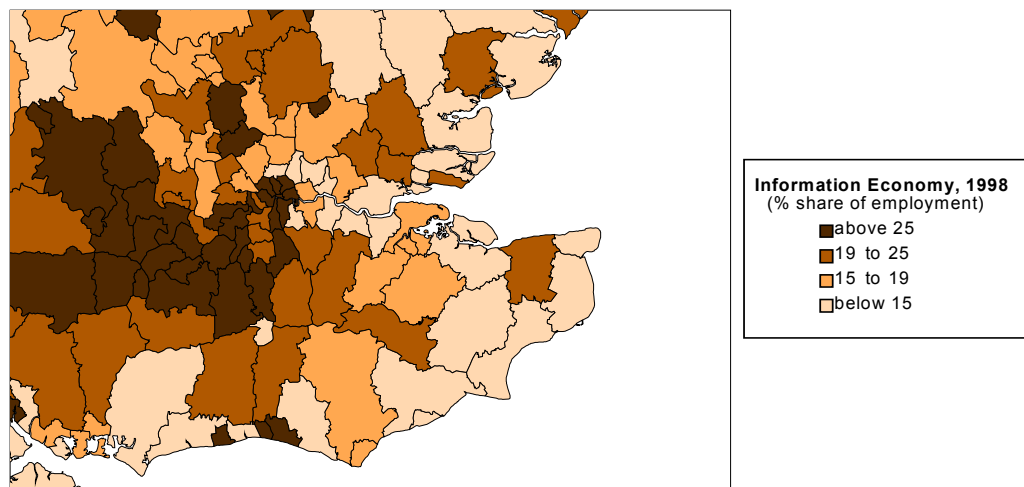
Source: Indices of Deprivation 2000, DETR

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These charts indicate a higher greater concentration of (fig 2) deprived wards – as defined by 2000 DETR Indices of Deprivation – in the East of the region, in particular Kent and East Sussex. And a corresponding concentration (fig 3) of jobs in the information economy sector in the M4 Corridor area to the West of London.

Fig 3

The Geography of the Information Economy - Kent



Source: The Local Futures Group

1.6:2 The report will return to the Assembly's approach to regional imbalances at a later stage. At an early meeting Paul Bevan, when asked about the Assembly's approach to areas like East Kent, said that it was not the Assembly's role to champion the needs of an individual sub-regional area. This identifies the fine balance that needs to be struck between the regional perspective and local realities. Paul Bevan went on to say at a meeting of the Select Committee:-

“I would say that we can show a model of regional governance that is based on partnership. Does not jeopardise the peace. Does not jeopardise the very strong structure of local government that we have. That is inclusive and involving of stakeholders.”

This emphasis on consensus and strategic distance will need to be considered in the context of sub-regional difference and competition.

Section Two

2.1 Processes of the Assembly

2.1:1 This section should not simply be viewed as further background information. The Committee made numerous visits to observe the various processes of the Assembly in action. From these visits issues arose about the way the Assembly organises its business and the input that members were able to have in to policy development. The Committee was interested to explore whether or not this had a bearing on East/West imbalances.

2.1:2 The full Assembly normally meets 3 times per year. Assembly plenary sessions are an opportunity for Members to receive feedback from the Assembly Executive and from other agencies such as SEEDA. The full Assembly also has the opportunity to vote on decisions taken by the Executive. Plenary sessions are also used as an opportunity for Members to contribute to policy development through the use of workshops and discussion forums.

2.1:3 With 111 Members the opportunities for debate at the plenary sessions appeared to the Committee to be limited. But it was recognised that the full meetings were a necessary part of a variety of processes that are in place to engage members in policy development and the Assembly officers did all that they could to ensure that members had an opportunity to contribute.

2.1:4 Members of the Select Committee also observed Planning and Executive Committee meetings, approximately 20-30 Members and Officers attended these sessions. The agendas for these meetings were considerable and there was a concern expressed by a Member of the Planning Committee that there were “insufficient opportunities for member involvement.” This came in response to a regional strategy that had been put before the Committee.

In discussion both Paul Bevan and Mike Gwilliam made the point that the Committees are not the only forums for debate and that during the development of policy there are workshops for members to contribute to the development of policy. Therefore by the time a strategy has reached the Planning Committee there will already have been opportunities to contribute and influence.

2.1:5 Paul Bevan also made the point that the business of the Assembly is very different from that of a local authority and that the size of the region inhibits Member involvement:-

“It is not a day to day thing, we are not fire-fighting, we are looking at long term proposals so what we try to do is involve members at key stages and have plenty of opportunity for member workshops and member discussions on the development of our policies. The frustrating thing is trying to get, even [on] those occasions, a proper turn out and engagement, it’s very difficult.”

2.1:6 In an earlier discussion Mr Bevan told the Committee that the main success of the Assembly in a region that is politically diverse and in some cases ambivalent about its role is to have an Assembly that engages the membership and looks and

feels like a professional organisation. Previously the feeling was that regional government existed but it was faceless bureaucracy, “the Assembly’s role has been to bring some accountability to that faceless bureaucracy.”

2.1:7 There was no evidence that particular sub-regional concerns were ill served by the Assembly’s processes. By the time a strategy reaches the Planning and Executive Committees it should already include local input from Members and Officers. These Committees in particular adopt a different focus to that which may be adopted locally. Councillor Barry Coppock (Chairman of Thanet District Council) told the Select Committee about his approach to membership of the Executive Committee:-

“Don’t go there if you don’t want to see the bigger picture”

Councillor Coppock was making the point that when sitting as a Member of the Executive Committee he felt that his responsibility was to put aside local concerns in order to consider the interests of the region.

2.2 Advisory Groups and the relationship with GOSE

2.2:1 The Assembly has numerous Advisory groups to support policy development. Membership of these groups includes Officers from the Assembly, where relevant SEEDA, GOSE, local authority officers and regional stakeholders (for a full list of Advisory Groups see Appendix 3.)

2.2:2 The Committee looked at how the Advisory groups were able to support policy development and identified some areas of concern. It is apparent that a lot of the fine detail of policy development will take place in the Advisory groups. The concerns raised were about the independence of the groups and communication between the groups.

2.2:3 On the question of independence the Committee recognised throughout its consideration that the Assembly, GOSE and SEEDA are necessarily close and commendably untroubled by quarrels over boundaries. However what was described as the “ubiquitous” presence of GOSE officers on Assembly advisory groups raised some questions about how independent policy development is and who sets the agenda: the Assembly or Government.

The Committee was told that GOSE exert “enormous pressure” on the Assembly to develop strategies to complement RPG9.

“GOSE are on all the advisory groups, and I have seen deference to GOSE by officers of the Executive. [That] allows centralised control and influence to come very fast.” (Leigh Herington)

The Committee has received evidence that the Assembly *has* challenged Government on policy issues but for some the perception remains that Government has a strong influence on the Assembly’s policy agenda.

2.2:4 The Committee was concerned to find that the Economic Advisory Group had not met since March of 2002 and two of its meetings had been cancelled. This is a matter of particular concern given that the Regional Economic Strategy was put out for consultation during this period.

2.2:5 KCC officers sitting on advisory groups expressed some concerns also about their lack of input possible in to the key strategies. There was some criticism of the way that the recent Tourism strategy reached the advisory groups at the consultation stage rather than at an earlier point in the process.

“Only at that stage did it appear possible for anybody to say anything about it.” (Dr. Linda Davies, County Environmental Management Officer)

Issues such as rural proofing on regional strategies should not be bolt-ons but rather an integrated part of policy development. Rural proofing implies that rural issues and concerns have been considered during policy development.

2.2:6 It is clear that the logistics involved in getting members and officers together to discuss policy are far more complicated at a regional level than they are at a local level. It is also clear that the Assembly is under pressure to meet the demands that are placed upon it by Government; it needs to do so to maintain credibility. But it is also apparent that this would be achieved at some cost.

2.2:7 Paul Clokie, Assembly member and Leader of Ashford Borough Council gave this concern, when he said:-

“At the end of the day you have to rely on your officers to influence their officers and hope that the reports that come out are covering your little patch if nothing else because you know that after a few speeches from a few people who wish to be seen they will go through.”

Given that the Assembly should increase accountability through the public participation of its members this is a concern and serves to emphasise how important the advisory groups are.

2.2:8 Paul Bevan recognised that the Assembly must be seen as representative if it is to maintain influence:-

“We can only be as influential as we can be representative. The Government does choose to listen to Regional Assemblies perhaps because it is politically inclined to, and we are the outcome of one of their policy initiatives. But the more we can be shown that we are representative the more influence we will have. So it is very important that first of all the people have heard of us and know what we do and that our representatives who actually sit on the Assembly feed in and feed back and act as representatives.”

Mr Bevan indicated that there is little to be gained from having an antagonistic relationship with government. The variety of policy initiatives developed by Assembly members (including Social Exclusion, Regional Health Forum etc.) indicates that the Assembly has established a representative voice for the region independent of GOSE.

2.3 Relationship with SEEDA

2.3:1 In the previous section the report looked at the Assembly's relationship with GOSE. In this section the report will look at the way that SEEDA and the Assembly work together.

2.3:2 The Committee spoke to SEEDA Chief Executive Anthony Dunnett; who told the Committee that the Assembly has:-

“an active role in working with us to ensure that all the partners in the region subscribe to the [Regional Economic] Strategy. As a region we have done quite well in getting partners to understand that, it's not perfect, everyone hasn't got their way, but this is actually the right middle road to take.”

2.3:3 As outlined above SEEDA has responsibility for economic development and delivering the Regional Economic Strategy (RES). The Committee identified a concern that economic priorities do not necessarily mesh with planning and transport priorities. Leigh Herington explained to the Committee that in terms of planning:-

“The driver is economic: where is the new investment, where are the new jobs going to be created?”

Members expressed their concern that there could be a policy gap to Mr Dunnett, but he indicated that the consultation for the RES has been thorough and exhaustive.

“We spent a year talking about it and everybody has had a chance to kick the cat so I think we mostly picked everything up on that issue.” (Anthony Dunnett, SEEDA Chief Executive)

The Committee voiced the same concerns to Mike Gwilliam and he responded:-

“Transport is something we were asked to take forward and economics is something they (SEEDA) were asked to take forward. I don't see why we can't have a strong read-across without necessarily having it all in one place.”

2.3:4 The Committee pursued this because it felt some concern about the treatment of East Kent particularly in the Regional Transport Strategy (RTS). Another KCC Select Committee had already been told that improved transport links and the development of Manston Airport were crucial factors in regeneration in Thanet. A report prepared for the East Kent Area Strategic Partnership on CTRL Domestic rail services in August 2002 says:-

“At a sub-regional level, SEEDA has highlighted transport as a key priority in achieving economic development in East Kent, as witnessed by its support of lobbying efforts on key, road, rail and airport issues...” (Stear, Davies, Gleave 2002, B3.4 17)

Crucially the East Kent Area Strategic Partnership have recently expressed concerns about the treatment given to East Kent in the RTS.

Leigh Herington told the Committee that the Assembly does support the regeneration of priority areas as identified in RPG9 but the Assembly itself does not have a budget, “it must impact on government to be influential.”

2.3:5 Tim Martin (KCC Economic Development Manager) told the Committee his understanding of the Assembly's role with regard to priority areas (PAER's):-

“I would expect the Assembly to champion the areas in the RPG and in the Coastal strip as a whole. I can understand that they may not wish to champion Thanet versus Dover shall we say. I do think there's a question of clear support in policy and advocacy along the whole of the Coastal strip.”

There is a clear link here to issues of East/West imbalance. Priority areas like East Kent clearly demand considerable support and advocacy on the part of the Assembly. Average household incomes are more than 20% lower than the average for the South East Region as a whole (Stear, Davies Gleave 2002). However this needs to be balanced alongside the demands from the wealthier West to sustain growth through continued investment.

2.4 The Regional perspective and sub-regional focus

2.4:1 When considering regional strategies it is apparent that judgements need to be made on what is an issue of regional significance and what is of local significance only and these judgements need to be balanced with priorities across the whole region.

2.4:2 Policies developed at regional level will need to make judgements on the degree of significance sub-regional issues have and prioritise their outputs accordingly. To achieve this necessitates balancing a variety of competing interests; this has the potential for conflict. Mike Gwilliam told the Committee that the Assembly has to demonstrate that it has assessed and considered its outputs:-

“I am not trying to be grand but if we as an Assembly say to Government ‘look our shopping list is this long’ we lose all credibility with everybody. We have to have some sense that we have been careful in coming to priorities and not asking for everything. Therefore if we are making a case for more investment in the East, and clearly we are, the question is whether to do more. We have to acknowledge that there are some problems in the West as well – congestion and so on – so it's that tug of war. I think it is the biggest dilemma in the Assembly process.”

2.4:3 Local Authorities and Districts will also make the same kind of judgements at a local level and will make every effort to promote their causes. Individual authorities can energetically promote their own causes and issues but in a regional context issues experienced locally (whether of regional significance or not) may be given a lower priority. It may still be preferable to have the issues weighed by regional partners than by a more remote authority, such as national government, even though a low level of regional recognition may diminish the force of sub-regional demands.

2.4:4 The tug-of-war referred to above between competing demands for attention and resources is a basic function of the Assembly as a shared arena. Whether it is more successful for an individual authority to vigorously pursue its own ends unmediated by regional influence or to align with regional partners is probably not possible to measure. Ultimately local authorities will continue to lobby for their own priorities – the Assembly is far from the only interface with Government – but the Assembly’s role as supporter of local initiatives will be easier to perform than the role of gainsayer.

Councillor Barry Coppock identified the need to take a regional perspective and the inevitable compromises and disappointments that this may bring at a local level:-

“I think you (KCC) are brilliant for Kent, quite rightly. You are not brilliant for the South East Region. You will make the case and your case will be heard for Kent but what the Regional Assembly does [is] it looks at a bigger picture, sometimes maybe to our dissatisfaction.”

Paul Bevan asserted that the Assembly’s priorities derive from the RPG:-

“Everything we do whether it is a transport strategy, whether it is looking at the Regional Economic Strategy, looking at what the Environment Agency and the NHS has to read back to the Regional Planning Guidance which is the approved policy document that we are guardians of. And that does have sub-regional priorities quite clearly.”

2.4:5 At a meeting of the Regional Planning Committee Councillor Lawrence Silverman from Reading expressed a concern that policy and infrastructure investment should not be solely determined by regeneration priorities:-

“It is natural and acceptable that government funds should go to the areas that need it, but the notion that public spending should be driven by welfare is odd. Infrastructure investment is needed in areas of success otherwise that success is not sustainable.”

Paul Bevan was asked how the Assembly reconciled the need to sustain growth in the West with more demands for more opportunities in the East of the region. Mr Bevan indicated that he agreed with Councillor Silverman, planning issues should be resolved on the basis of a regional strategy that best serves the interests of the region as a whole.

2.5 Assembly resources and the policy agenda

2.5:1 The Committee perceived that the Assembly is under pressure to maintain credibility and fulfil the programme dictated by RPG9. Many involved have acknowledged that the Assembly is a very small team that is dependent on the co-operation of local authorities to achieve its goals.

2.5:2 This raised questions for the Committee regarding the appropriate use of the Assembly’s limited resources; could the Assembly be more assertive in limiting its scope and workload? And, could better use be made of limited resources by

focusing on core issues – planning and accountability? Effectively the Committee sought to question the Assembly’s work on crosscutting issues like health and social exclusion.

When questioned on this issue Mr Bevan explained that the decision to look at Social Exclusion and set up the Regional Health Forum was driven by members. Initially members looked at Social Exclusion through the mechanism of a Select Committee with the help of a secondee from Thanet District Council. This then led members to consider what other issues could benefit from consideration at a regional level and recognising that the South East is the worst performing region in the NHS in the country members decided to look at health and the NHS. This in turn led to the development of the Healthy Region Forum. Mr Bevan believes that the Forum has an important role to play in public health and joining up regional policies to:-

“Make the connections that would focus much more strongly on health and inequalities and improved public health which is fundamentally for the wellbeing of the people in the region and I think on [that] agenda there is a big job to do.”

2.5:3 It is clear however that with new structures of local authority involvement in NHS scrutiny there is at least the possibility that some of the work done in the Healthy Region Forum will be duplicated by other structures. It may be that the question here has less to do with the appropriateness of the forum but rather concerns prioritisation of the Assembly’s resources.

2.5:4 It should be recognised that this is also an example of non-executive members finding and adopting a role at regional level. An issue for such a large Assembly with a high proportion of non-executive members is to retain engagement for those not directly involved with the core policy areas.

2.5:5 The concern remains that the ‘big’ issues, those that are squarely the Assembly’s responsibility may not achieve the level of prominence they require. Jeremy Leggett (Chief Executive of Sussex RCC and Assembly Member) told the Committee:-

“I think the blizzard of very big policy issues that are hitting the region at the moment and have been over the last six to nine months or so have meant that the amount of time really needed for reflection and debate outside of where formal decisions are being made has become very scarce.”

2.5:6 Sir Graeme Odgers (Chairman of Kent & Medway Economic Board and Assembly Member) reinforced the understanding of the crosscutting effect that issues such as health and social exclusion have on planning and economic development:-

“Issues of health and social exclusion impact directly on competitiveness and economic growth. Kent and Medway has been recognised within the South East by SEEDA as having the largest geographic area of economic priority because of the number of deprived wards in the North and East of the County, wards in which health and social exclusion are issues of key

concern. On this basis and in principle I welcome the rounded approach the Assembly seeks to take. In practice I think it is too soon to judge if the manner in which the cross-cutting issues are approached is adding value or, layers of complication.”

While it is clear that particular issues demand a regional perspective the Committee identified the Assembly’s role as regional planning body as being of prime importance. There is at least a perception that member involvement on core issues is less than it might be while officer time is in demand. In this context the Committee would welcome efforts to engage a wider section of the Assembly’s membership with the core policy areas of planning and transport. These issues may be less accessible than the ‘people’ orientated issues of health or social exclusion but the Assembly should be wary of duplicating structures and processes that are (or could be) delivered by another agency, to the detriment of its core responsibilities.

2.6 Transport Issues in Kent and the RTS

2.6:1 The Regional Transport Strategy that the assembly put out for consultation in May 2002 represents one of the Assembly’s most significant and tangible outputs since its inception. As such the strategy and its implications for Kent is a key part of the Committee’s evaluation of the Assembly.

2.6:2 Kent’s unique position and proximity to the Continent means that the road and rail network in Kent carry a considerable volume of traffic and freight through the county at great cost to the environment and quality of life of Kent’s residents. In this context Kent suffers disproportionately to the rest of the region.

2.6:3 There has been a recognition in Kent that East Kent in particular requires improved links to the rest of the county and London if issues of deprivation are to be addressed. In this context the County may have felt justified in expecting support from the Assembly on key transport issues such as CTRL Domestic services to North and East Kent and efforts to effect a modal change in freight movements through the County.

2.6:4 In addition to the road and rail links to East Kent the expansion of Manston Airport is viewed by members of the EK ASP and Thanet District Council as fundamental in securing improved rail links and supporting regeneration. In this context the Committee found evidence of dissatisfaction with the parts of the RTS that referred to the County’s most deprived area.

2.6:5 Development of Manston and rail links complements the needs of Dover port, the busiest ferry port in the country. Currently the port does not have a direct rail link. With road freight through the County set to double over the next seven years there is a pressing need to re-assess the strategic importance in a regional context of Dover.

2.6:6 In passenger terms the port also suffers a double disadvantage. As road congestion increases the port becomes an increasingly unattractive destination for passengers. In the words of John Turgoose (Dover Harbour Board Marketing Manager) passengers now see Kent as an island to be hopped over on the way to

the Continent because of the difficulties associated with travelling through the County.

2.6:7 There is also a synergy between the port and Manston who in the past have worked to together bringing cruise liners and passengers to Dover via Manston. Dover Harbour Board and Manston have also begun to explore the potential of the common skills their staff have developed in handling freight to supply staff at Manston from the port when the demand arises. The area is a base for the pharmaceuticals company Pfizer Ltd. a very significant employer in the area. Pfizer estimate that the lack of good rail connections costs them £8 million per year. In addition the company estimate that they have moved £50-70 million of investment because of poor access to the area.

In this context the Area Strategic Partnership's response to the initial consultation of the RTS is particularly disappointing:-

“While we welcome some of what the draft currently contains, we believe that this draft falls a long way short of meeting the legitimate aspirations of East Kent and the minimum required within the Plan's life to bring about the much needed regeneration of an area at the end of the Kent peninsular that has become unnecessarily peripheral. Its status as a Priority Area for Regeneration should qualify East Kent as a priority area for investment, including transport investment. We would therefore expect to see our own priorities more effectively reflected in the final Regional Transport Strategy.” (From letter in response to the consultation draft of RTS – Vaila Marshall, Pfizer Ltd/EKASP)

2.6:8 The Committee put the points raised in Vaila Marshall's letter to Mike Gwilliam (Assembly Director of Planning). Mr Gwilliam accepted that the draft RTS should have said more about issues in East Kent but added that his team were in the process of strengthening the recommendations on CTRL and the M2 corridor. On the specific issue of Manston Airport Mike Gwilliam said:-

“The idea of not relying on entirely on the very big airports seems to us to make good sense, so indeed we felt confident in encouraging Southampton in that role. In the case of Manston it hasn't had that role in the past. You are proposing in Kent that it should have and what we are saying is now let's have a look at more evidence on this.”

2.6:9 When members of the Committee spoke to Paul Tipple (Head of Strategy and Development at Wiggins plc & Chairman of East Kent Strategic Partnership (EKASP)) he voiced his concern with the treatment of Manston in the RTS:-

“Manston is hardly mentioned at all, that's nonsense. The report makes the case for expansion of Southampton. Southampton did 80000 passengers last year that equates in workload units to the same as Manston in terms of cargo. In part its ignorance of what's going on in East Kent - ask yourself where's the focus. A lot of it is around London and the M4 corridor. There's the notion that development rolls out gradually from London. That's fine but you have to step over as well to areas like this. That's why transport links are so important for this area.”

Paul Tipple indicated that there had been no direct consultation between the Assembly and either Wiggins (as owners of Manston) or the ASP.

2.6:10 The Assembly's support on the issue of CTRL Domestic services is broadly welcomed but the particular needs of East Kent could have been better served by a more detailed and explicit indication of support for CTRL (D) services on the East Kent line to Thanet.

"The Channel Tunnel Rail Link will provide for 300 km/h running for Eurostar services and for fast domestic services linking major stations in Kent with St Pancras. It will contribute to regeneration in the Thames Gateway area and in several areas of Kent. The first section of the link will open in 2003, with the final section programmed for completion in early 2007." (RTS Consultation Draft)

The East Kent Area Strategic Partnership made this point in their response to the RTS, (17 September 2002):-

"The Channel Tunnel Rail Link provides a unique opportunity to improve passenger services to East Kent and to achieve our objective of London in an hour by Rail. Direct access from Thanet, Canterbury and Dover to the high-speed line, without interchange is of major importance and it is a matter of very great concern that this is not currently recognised in the draft Strategy." (Vaila Marshall, EKASP 17.9.02)

2.6.11 The sub-regional section of the RTS makes reference to regeneration and CTRL:-

"11.62 The Channel Tunnel Rail Link will improve access to the Channel Tunnel, with the first part of the Link open in 2003, followed by final part in 2007. In addition to providing the route for international services, the Rail Link has the capacity to accommodate up to eight trains per hour for domestic services. The Regional Assembly will work closely with the SRA and local stakeholders to ensure that the pattern of domestic services assists regeneration and renewal within this sub-region."

However this does not explicitly call for CTRL (D) to Thanet, or a connection with Manston. There is an ongoing debate between stakeholders in the Kent rail network, the SRA and the DfT regarding the development of CTRL and the impact on areas not on the CTRL main line. There is a qualitative difference for areas like Thanet between shuttle services linking to the CTRL at Ashford and CTRL domestic services extending beyond the CTRL on existing lines. Alex King (KCC Cabinet Member, Regeneration) told the Committee that a clearer demonstration of support for specific projects would have given KCC more leverage with the SRA and DfT.

"Had the regional transport strategy been written differently one would be using that as a significant lever with the SRA and Government" (Alex King, KCC Cabinet Member – Regeneration)

2.6:12 The same lack of detail complicates the Assembly's support for CTRL (D) services on the North Kent Line. The draft RTS says:-

“11.8 In order to realise the full potential of Ebbsfleet as a transport Hub it will be essential to integrate the domestic services using the Channel Tunnel Rail Link with local services operating on the North Kent Line.”

Debate is continuing over whether there should be CTRL (D) services off the CTRL, how far those services should extend on the NKL, where they should stop, and whether they should be in addition to or substitute existing services. Neither does the RTS highlight capacity problems at Rochester Bridge junction, which is the key to any increase in capacity on the NKL to Medway.

It is not clear what the phrase “integrate the domestic services” implies. The RTS gives full recognition to the general principle that the Thames Gateway needs an improved rail service as a complement to the development of an integrated transport system and this is welcomed. But the particular issues, that may inhibit that development, are not discussed fully enough.

2.6:13 With reference to the lack of a rail link to Dover the RTS lacks clarity on a complex issue. The RTS says:-

“The railway system should be developed to carry an increasing share of freight movements. In particular, the Regional Assembly considers that priority should be given to providing enhanced rail freight capacity on the following corridors (in priority order):-

1. Southampton to West Midlands;
2. Dover/Channel Tunnel to London;
3. Great Western Main Line.”

Support for a rail freight link to Dover is more complicated than support for a link to Folkestone because of problems with the loading gauge between Dover and Folkestone. The reality is that upgrades of the line to the port are likely to be prohibitively expensive. Improved freight links to the Tunnel and not Dover would increase the ports relative disadvantage, but a direct freight link to Dover would involve very expensive work on the tunnels that undercut the cliffs between Dover and Folkestone. By linking Dover and the Channel Tunnel together as one issue in its policy summaries the RTS avoids discussion of the very specific problems that inhibit the growth of the second largest port in the region.

2.6:14 The Committee feels that the RTS does not distinguish clearly enough between the issues that affect the Port of Dover and the Channel Tunnel. The RTS says:-

“11.61 The Gateways of the Port of Dover and the Channel Tunnel are both located within the sub-region and act as foci for economic activity as well as being infrastructure of international significance. The need to have high quality access to these Gateways is both a regional and national priority.”

The RTS does recognise that factors that inhibit development exist but gives little direction on their resolution. The Committee accepts that further investigations in the Regional Ports Strategy and other studies may shed further light on this issue.

2.6:15 This issue requires first a decision and then investment from the Strategic Rail Authority. As the Assembly's main contribution to this debate would be to support any lobbying activities on behalf of the Kent network, the failure to distinguish between two key issues dilutes the impact of the Assembly's contribution.

2.6:16 Following the discussion with Mike Gwilliam the Committee recognises that the Assembly have sought to reconsider their initial appraisal of the needs of the East Kent area and are engaged in strengthening the relevant sections of the RTS. Mike Gwilliam also emphasised the potential value of the Assembly's contribution to Kent's need for infrastructure investment:-

"On transport I think it is evident that ... by not bringing our case together as a region I think we have not been making our voice heard loud enough in Government about some of the priorities for the region as a whole. I do believe the region has been rather poorly served compared with other regions and that's partly because it hasn't sung its song."

2.6:17 However the Committee also received evidence from KCC Cabinet Member Alex King which recognised that certain issues affecting the Kent transport network may not be of the same level of priority in the region as they are in Kent. On certain issues the role of the local authority will continue to be the most important in lobbying government or other strategic agencies for investment.

"I would not have seen SEERA as having a significant role in lobbying for Kent not least because we have to recognise that SEERA has to represent a very diverse and complex region. What is in the interests of Kent is not necessarily in the interests of the other 90% of its members."
(Mr Alex King, KCC Cabinet Member – Regeneration)

2.7 Housing

2.7:1 The demand for housing in the South East is increasing; the growth targets necessary to meet predicted demand have raised tensions on this issue. Two of the regions key growth areas are in Kent, Ashford and the parts of the Thames Gateway. The Assembly identified the work it has done to highlight the issue of affordable housing.

"We very much drove the agenda on affordable housing and pushed it up the Government's agenda. We made sure that it figured as one of the priority issues in the Regional Economic Strategy; that was thanks to the initiatives we have taken. The Government's announcements about the importance of affordable housing provision in the region in July I see as a direct result of the work that we have done." (Paul Bevan, Assembly Chief Executive)

2.7:2 There is a concern in Kent that economic development can not keep pace with high targets for housing growth. Leigh Herington (Chair of the Assembly Housing Advisory Group) suggested that the Assembly would begin to impact on this issue more directly when the formal review of Regional Planning Guidance begins in 2003.

When asked about the degree of influence the Assembly has exerted so far Leigh Herington said:-

“Government looks to its regional office and the assembly for advice on housing issues. Lord Falconer and Lord Rooker heard first hand from Mike Gwilliam about the issue. Secondly the Housing Advisory Group reported to the Planning Committee. The Assembly has been influential in its lobbying but I would not say very influential. The Assembly hasn’t had a major impact on infrastructure because they haven’t had time and others have been lobbying for very much longer.”

On this question it is clear that the debate returns to previous discussion of the relationship with GOSE and government. Ashford Borough Council Leader Paul Clokie was sceptical of the Assembly’s ability to mitigate the targets for housing growth in the town; particularly when housing growth does not necessarily imply growth in job opportunities:-

“SEERA seem to have accepted this argument that if you have 10 people standing on the street corner somebody’s bound to come along and offer them a job. But if there’s nobody standing on the street corner, then there won’t be any jobs on offer... and this belief that if you put lots of houses in you’ll suddenly have all these jobs. I don’t accept at all.”

Kent’s concern on this issue is that housing targets are not tied to economic development, land for housing is available but the rate of growth is unrealistic without the necessary investment to create viable, sustainable communities. The Assembly does not have responsibility for economic development except as the monitor of SEEDA’s activity but as the representative voice of the region with a direct a close link to GOSE and Government the Assembly should use its position to express these concerns.

2.7:3 At the Plenary session of the Assembly in Brighton in June 2002, the Leader of Kent County Council asked the, then, Chair of the Assembly’s Planning Committee to comment on this issue and his reply indicated that responsibility for housing targets sits with ODPM. At this stage it remains unclear what the Assembly adds to this debate. From one side there appears to be pressure from the ODPM and GOSE for the Assembly to deliver agreement on growth targets, but on the other there are the concerns of local and district authorities about concomitant levels of investment to support growth.

2.8 Rural Issues

2.8:1 Rural issues have a particular bearing on concerns about East/West imbalance in the regional economy; Kent is a largely rural county. Dr Linda Davies (County Environment Manager and Rural Advisory Group Member) spoke to the Select Committee to explain the impact of the Assembly on rural issues.

2.8:2 Dr Davies identified a potential contradiction between government at a regional level and the need to represent the diverse voices of small, local communities. There appears to be a fundamental tension between the needs of

small communities and the ability of regional government to respond at that level. If as Dr Davies says, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach has little relevance in such a large and diverse region, it may be legitimate to question the relevance of regional policy. However regional policy can provide a regional context in which rural issues could be considered.

2.8:3 Rural proofing of Assembly policy could be one way to address any imbalance of emphasis. Dr Davies told the Committee that some groups representing rural concerns have been dissatisfied with SEEDA and Assembly and the emphasis placed on urban. In this context the current Assembly Select Committee set up to look at the effectiveness of SEEDA in rural areas is welcomed as a proactive step.

2.8:4 Given the relative lack of economic growth in Kent Dr Davies acknowledged that there is some tension between the need to generate economic growth in the east through diversification and the development of market towns, and the potential threat to the rural environment that such development can present. On this point Council Leader Paul Clokie from Ashford welcomed the Assembly's continued support in planning terms for growth in Ashford's urban centre and the continued protection of the Borough's rural wards. The Assembly's rejection of proposals in SERAS to develop land at Cliffe in North Kent as a regional airport indicates support for the principle that economic growth should not be achieved at the expense of the environment.

2.8:5 The future vitality of the smaller settlements is though, an important issue in relation to rural services and job deprivation and one which is masked at greater scales, and may well justify local change. Regional policy is unlikely to be sufficiently fine grained to influence this critical issue.

2.8:6 Jeremy Leggett from SRCC recognised the important contribution that the Assembly had made to influence the government on the issue of affordable housing in rural areas:-

"I think the initiative the Assembly took a year ago to really raise the issue of the housing crisis with Government ... meant that in Sussex we have started to see more affordable social housing in rural areas."

2.8:7 Leigh Herington's has queried the degree of impact the Assembly actually had on this issue, but the point is made that the Assembly has responded to the concerns raised by the Social and Environmental partners.

2.9 Social, Environmental and Economic Partners and accountability

2.9:1 The Committee felt some concern at the role and degree of influence that the Business, Social and Environmental partners have in the Assembly. The over-arching concern in raising this issue is that a lack of democratic representation may be one way that sub-regional issues are diminished in significance.

Leigh Herington told the Committee:-

“Helping the South East muster resources and good planning is helpful. The misgiving I have is the accountability ... I think there is a flaw in the system when ultimate policy is accountable to an Assembly that, for all their expertise, has a large voluntary and private sector voice. I think democracy should come top of the pile. And those democracies whether they be local or regional should be trusted to do the job, and therefore having stakeholders who are invited in because they're on somebody's contact list I think is inequitable and is erosive of local accountability.”

The Committee were also concerned to find in the Assembly's constitution that the Voluntary and Social Sector Members had two votes to District authority Member's one vote. It is recognised that this weighting of the voting system gives the social, environmental and economic partners 30% of the voting power in the Assembly, and was a condition of designation as a Regional Chamber in the enabling guidance from Government legislation.

2.9:2 Jeremy Leggett countered this concern when he said:-

“certainly the social, community sector people on the Assembly bring ... an experience of a different kind of democracy to the one that goes through the conventional ballot box every four years ... They are representing a form of participatory democracy in which people get involved and I think having people there, particularly from the voluntary sector, is important because it is a counter balance to democracy that is entirely rooted in the political system.”

2.10 The Assembly and local government: added value

2.10:1 The Committee was most concerned to identify what the Assembly could add to what is achieved at Local Authority and District level. This report has already demonstrated that the Assembly is reliant on the input of officers from the member of authorities to achieve its outputs. Where policies already exist at advanced level and lobbying already takes place it is important to identify what the Assembly can add.

2.10:2 A point that emerged very clearly from the review is that the Assembly has an important role to play as a coherent voice of the region, where experience can be shared and arguments developed that strengthen the region's case in competition with other regions.

“I think you need some opportunity to share experience at the regional level and for certain big issues to be dealt with at the regional level ... We do need technical discussions about how we're going to advise our elected councils as to what should happen with demographics and transport and employment supply. So that is necessary and it needs to be facilitated and SEERA has a role there at a technical level. The South East does need a body which will help the South East compete against other English regions.” (Leigh Herington)

2.10:3 The Committee also heard evidence from Mark Billsborough (GOSE – Director of the Kent Team) that the Assembly played an important role in gathering and representing the democratic voice of the region:-

“There is no doubt that the Government Office or even SEEDA can do things like the Regional Planning Guidance, or the Regional Transport Strategy and we could do it. And yet we wouldn’t have that kind of local buy-in that potentially we get from having it brought to us by the eclectic of local authorities. So that potentially strengthens the whole process. And also because there are so many of you and you are so disparate and [because] there are lots of different things happening in the area it is really useful to be able to get a local authority view that is bigger than just one authority. That is where the Assembly comes in, if we didn’t have the Assembly, be it elected or not elected, it would be hugely difficult to get that composite view without holding lots and lots of conferences and events.”

This statement pre-supposes that the ‘composite view’ that is gathered is fully representative. The concerns expressed above are that Member engagement in the important issues is not as broad as it could be and that the policy agenda is so demanding that the ‘composite view’ is a convenience to Government rather than a representation of collective debate.

2.10:4 Paul Bevan strongly rejected this argument. He said that the Constitution of the Assembly does provide opportunities for Members to register their concerns and to have input. Sometimes these processes are not used appropriately but the opportunities are there. In addition to this Mr Bevan explained that there is little to be gained from having an antagonistic relationship with government and the variety of policy initiatives developed by Assembly members indicates that the Assembly has established a representative voice for the region, independent of GOSE.

2.10:5 The Committee welcomed the news from Mr Bevan that the Constitution is currently undergoing a review. Members expressed the hope that the outcomes from this review should emphasise the primacy of local democratic realities rather than any arbitrary form of centralised tokenism and an increase in unelected Assembly members from the Social, Environmental and Economic sector.

2.10:6 The Committee spoke to numerous Assembly Members and gained their views on what membership meant to them. Many welcomed the opportunity to meet and engage with other members and discuss technical issues or shared concerns. The Regional Planning Committee was identified as a particularly useful forum in this context.

Councillor Barry Coppock also indicated that membership of the Assembly gave him a valuable opportunity to raise local and regional concerns at a higher level than he would otherwise have access to:-

“For the likes of me to be in a meeting, not much bigger than this one every six weeks in the Nat West Tower where you do slip in the odd rugby tackle about deprivation or whatever I find is a very good avenue; it’s the nearest I’ll get to the corridors of power.”

At an officer level the issue of added value appeared less clear. Many emphasised that the full influence is yet to be seen. The concerns highlighted above regarding the Advisory Groups and the lack of sharing of policy initiatives at an early stage gave some grounds for concern on this issue.

Dr Linda Davies said that:-

“It’s early days for the Assembly but it may help to get a more integrated approach to the way rural issues are managed because there is a potentially powerful voice”

Other comments indicated that the Assembly was viewed simply as another layer, without which local objectives would not change. The discussion above concerning the RTS also indicates that there are concerns that regional policy may be insufficiently detailed to deal effectively with local issues. However regional policies do provide a context within which local authorities can develop their own strategies.

Section Three

3.1 Conclusions

1. The Committee recognises the valuable contribution that the Assembly makes in representing the needs of the region in a national context. The Committee also recognises that the Assembly's staff have achieved a great deal, with limited resources, to establish a credible and efficient regional body.
2. The Committee has not found sufficient evidence to indicate that the Assembly is devoting adequate resources to address structural imbalance between the East and West of the region.
3. The Committee recognises that the Assembly has a significant role in the development of regional policy. The Assembly represents the concerns of the region on planning and transport issues to Government; in the Committee's view the description of the Assembly as a "talking-shop" is inappropriate. The Committee recognises the steps that have been taken to establish a professional and effective regional body. Despite the transitional status of regional assemblies (after the government White Paper "Your Region, Your Choice") the Assembly should be open to critical analysis of its outputs.
4. It is recognised by the Local Authority and the Regional Development Agency that the East Kent sub-regional area experiences regionally significant levels of deprivation and isolation. The local transport infrastructure is a key contributor. At this stage the Committee found no evidence to suggest that the Assembly has identified either the significance of the area's deprivation, or the steps necessary to impact on the area's isolation. (2.3:5, 2.6:9, 2.6:14)
5. With specific reference to the Regional Transport Strategy the Committee welcomed the broad recognition of important transport issues in Kent (CTRL (D), M20 Junction 10,) but identified a superficiality that belied some of the complex issues involved (for example East Kent access, CTRL(D), and Port of Dover). In this context the Committee questions what the Assembly actually adds to Kent's own efforts to address these issues. (2.3:4, 2.6:7– 2.6:15)
6. The Committee received evidence, which indicated that the Assembly's scant resources were stretched to the limit by an unrealistic agenda that is driven by GOSE rather than Assembly members. The Assembly Executive has been posed with a dilemma; there is a need to establish and maintain the Assembly's reputation as a significant and effective regional body but there is insufficient time to allow for active member involvement with core policy issues. (2.1:4, 2.5:5)
7. The Committee is concerned that GOSE appears to exert unreasonable pressure and influence. The Committee accepts that the Assembly should try to maintain a constructive relationship with the Government Office but the Assembly's position should be balanced and independent. (2.2:3, 2.2:5)
8. The Committee recognises the challenges that the Assembly's executive face in sustaining member involvement across such a large region, particularly non-

executive members, but were disappointed that more evidence was not apparent of coherent processes necessary to achieve this. (2.1:4)

9. The Committee recognises that there are many issues that may benefit from discussion and debate at regional level. The Committee also recognises that the Assembly can have an input to debate on crosscutting themes that are not directly part of the main policy areas. But, the Committee does not accept that work on the Health Forum, or social exclusion, are core responsibilities. Greater efforts should be made to use the Assembly's limited staff resources to engage members in the core policy areas of planning and transport and of monitoring the economic responsibilities of SEEDA. (2.1:4, 2.2:7 2.9:1)
10. The Committee identified a lack of co-ordination at the advisory group level, and was particularly concerned that best use has not been made of the resources available. Wider debate should take place within the Advisory group structure on policy development before regional strategies reach the consultation stage.(2.2:3, 2.2:4,2.2:5)
11. The lack of co-ordination at advisory group level (referred to above) raised a concern that constructive rural-proofing was not an integral part of the policy development process. It is the Committee's view that this compounds the incongruity of a regional perspective where the challenges in rural areas demand locally derived solutions. KCC is currently piloting a project to rural-proof its policy initiatives and the Assembly could draw on the experience developed in this project. (2.2:5, 2.8:2)
12. The Committee is concerned that the democratic voice of the region is not adequately represented in the Assembly or in its voting structure. The practice of including unelected social, environmental, and economic partners is useful but the Committee would question their role at the heart of the decision-making process. (2.9:1)
13. Transport and economic development are two closely linked areas of policy and share a mutually affective relationship. The Committee is not persuaded that the current division of responsibilities between SEEDA and the Assembly is sensible. Despite assurances to the contrary the Committee did not find a common understanding of priorities in East Kent where improved transport links are a pre-condition for sustained economic regeneration. (2.3:3, 2.3:4)

3.2 Appendices

Appendix 1 – Witnesses

Paul Bevan – Chief Executive – South East England Regional Assembly

Mark Billsborough – Kent Team Director, GOSE

Barry Coppock – Chairman, Thanet District Council

Paul Clokie – Leader, Ashford Borough Council

Dr Linda Davies – County Environment Officer, KCC

Anthony Dunnett – Chief Executive, SEEDA

Leigh Herington – County Planning Officer, KCC

Sarah Hohler – Cabinet Member for Community Services, KCC

Mike Gwilliam - Director of Planning and Transport, SEERA

Alex King – Cabinet Member for Regeneration, KCC

Jeremy Leggett – Chief Executive, Sussex Rural Communities Council

Tim Martin – Policy Manager, KCC

Vaila Marshall – Member, EKASP (Pfizer Ltd)

Sir Graeme Odgers – Chairman, Kent and Medway Economic Board

David Suaunders – Assistant Permanent Secretary, DTI

Paul Tipple – Chairman, East Kent Area Strategic Partnership (Wiggins plc)

Appendix 2 - Abbreviations

CTRL (D) – Channel Tunnel Rail Link (Domestic Services)

DTI – Department of Trade and Industry

EKASP – East Kent Area Strategic Partnership

GOSE – Government Office South East

KCC – Kent County Council

KMEB – Kent and Medway Economic Board

NKL – North Kent Line

ODPM – Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

PAER – Priority Area of Economic Regeneration

RDA – Regional Development Agency (e.g. SEEDA)

RES – Regional Economic Strategy

RPG – Regional Planning Guidance

RTS – Regional Transport Strategy

SEEDA – South East Economic Development Agency

SEERA – South East England Regional Assembly

SERAS – South East Regional Airports Study

SRCC – Sussex Rural Communities Council

Appendix 3 – Assembly Advisory Groups

Housing

Minerals

Natural Resources

Rural Issues

Strategy

The Economy

Transport

Urban Renaissance

Waste

Appendix 4 – Select Committee Members

Mr Christopher Thornton (Chairman)

Mr Roy Ford

Mr Dan Daley

Mrs Paulina Stockell

Mr Ray Parker

Mr Frank Fox

Mr John Palmer