

Emailed to: devolutionappg@connectpa.co.uk

8 January 2021

Dear Sir/Madam,

Transport for the South East response to the Devolution All Party Parliamentary Group call for evidence

I am writing to you as lead officer for [Transport for the South East](#) (TfSE) to provide a response to the call for evidence regarding the role that central government has in making a success of devolution in England.

TfSE is a sub-national transport body (STB) bringing together leaders from across the local government, business and transport sectors to speak with one voice on our region's strategic transport needs. Since its inception in 2017, TfSE has quickly emerged as a powerful and effective partnership for our region and our ambition is to become a statutory body with devolved powers over key strategic transport issues.

Our principal decision-making body, the [Shadow Partnership Board](#), brings together representatives from our 16 constituent local transport authorities, five Local Enterprise Partnerships, district and borough authorities, protected landscapes, Highways England, Network Rail and Transport for London. Together, our partnership represents more than 7 million people and 350,000 businesses in the South East and benefits from invaluable expertise and insight from those responsible for our region's strategic transport networks.

The South East often finds itself on the periphery of discussions about devolution, not least because it is so often linked in with London. Our proximity to the capital and the polycentric nature of our region's main economic centres is, in some respects, a risk to growth within the region. The South East also has some of the most deprived communities in England. As the APPG points out, the UK's prosperity depends on local factors including housing, skills provision, the ability to fund services, land use and transport connections as well as the availability of public goods and services. All of this is facilitated by transport and communication links. If we are to build back better and provide opportunities for all then we must look again at what devolution can offer.

As such, we believe TfSE offers a credible vehicle for devolution in the South East. Our partnership has clear democratic accountability, strong stakeholder support and engagement, a track record of delivery in partnership with local and national partners, a thirty-year transport strategy in place and a strategic investment plan imminent.

Alongside our aspiration to become a statutory body, we would encourage government to consider a devolved approach to infrastructure investment funding, enabling partnerships such as ours to deliver the kinds of transformational integrated investment programmes needed to support sustainable economic recovery and growth and meet our carbon commitments.

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TfSE offers a credible vehicle for devolution of strategic transport in the South East. We have effective accountability as our board consists of democratically elected leaders and/or lead members from all the partner authorities and business leaders with a direct line of accountability to the people and organisations they represent. This robust governance structure provides the right blend of leadership, accountability, expertise and oversight of TfSE's programme.

TfSE is a partnership first and foremost. Our small secretariat works closely with, and draws additional support from, senior officers from our constituent authorities, LEPs and other partners. Together, they drive forward our technical programme and provide advice and support to our Partnership Board.

The board is also supported by our independent Transport Forum, which brings together a wide group of stakeholders including user groups, transport owners and operators, business groups, environmental groups and delivery partners. They not only contribute to the work of TfSE but provide a useful oversight function to ensure our work is scrutinised and evidence is robust. We believe this adds to the already strong democratic accountability which exists.

In addition, our transport strategy and proposal to government were not only subject to public consultation but were also taken through each of our constituent authorities' governance processes to provide opportunity to comment and confirm their support for TfSE's vision and goals. Their support was clear, unequivocal and unanimous.

We offer an effective mechanism for Government to engage with local authorities and LEPs and TfSE has already, in shadow form, added considerable value in bringing together partners and stakeholders to work with Government on key strategic issues. We secured positive outcomes for the region in the Roads Investment Strategy 2 and Major Road Network, influenced discussions on the future of rail franchising and provided collective views on schemes such as southern and western rail access to Heathrow.

We submitted our transport strategy to the Government in July 2020 and Baroness Vere has responded to confirm that the DfT are supportive of the strategy and TfSE as an organisation. Most importantly, she has stated that DfT officials are to ensure they have regard to our strategy when developing new policies. This was another step forward in the positive relationship we have been building with the Department for Transport over the past three years.

Alongside our transport strategy we also submitted a proposal to Government for statutory status. In response, the Secretary of State has advised that he is not minded to grant statutory status to any more STBs at this time (so Transport for the North remains the only statutory STB). Although disappointing, we knew this was going to be challenging for Government at this time, not least with the delays to the devolution white paper, Covid-19 and the end of the Brexit transition period.

The Secretary of State was clear that he supports STBs in general and the work TfSE does specifically to maintain and lead our partnership. So, while now may not be the time for Government to provide the tools needed to implement the transport strategy, we are confident that the evidence base which will come from the development of our strategic investment plan will clearly demonstrate why we need these powers. This will enable our partnership to be an even more powerful advocate for Government and help deliver its ambitions across a broad range of policy areas.

We believe Government should be flexible about its approach to devolution. For those locations, including the South East, that have either not been central to discussions around devolution or are not suited to current approaches around mayoral combined authorities, other ways to devolve should be considered.

STBs are an example of how powers over certain policy areas – particularly those, like transport, where strategic objectives can be best met by planning and delivery at geographic scale - can be devolved whilst remaining accountable.

It is important to see the merits of each individual STB and what they can offer. TfSE has always been clear that we only seek those powers and functions which are necessary to deliver our transport strategy and achieve our partnership's shared vision for the South East. Our requirements differ from those of other STBs and reflect the unique geographic, economic, political, social and environmental characteristics of our region and the strategic objectives of TfSE and our partners.

Central government funding approaches should adapt to help us meet the carbon challenge. A devolved regional investment pot would enable public and private sector partners, via STBs or other suitable devolved structures, to better plan and deliver the kinds of schemes which can enable genuinely transformational change and meet our carbon commitments. Speaking with one voice and with the benefit of regional scale and insight, TfSE provides a clear, prioritised view of the region's strategic transport investment needs.

Funding control would enable more efficient and effective operational delivery and better coordination of schemes and initiatives which cross local authority boundaries. We would be able to develop solutions working with partners and the market, which offer the most benefit delivered on a regional scale (for example, integrated travel solutions combined with smart ticketing will operate more effectively at a regional scale and can best be facilitated by a regional body than by individual organisations).

This regional coordination is imperative for effective decarbonisation of transport in the UK. STBs have a big part to play in this agenda and TfSE has already seized the opportunity to bring together our region's local authorities, universities and the private sector to discuss and identify what can be done to speed up decarbonisation in the South East. It is widely recognised that such efforts are most effective at the regional level (as argued by [Professor Greg Marsden's recent working paper](#)).

In conclusion, many of the big challenges we face – not just in transport but across a wide range of policy areas – extend beyond administrative and political boundaries. We want Transport for the South East to become a genuinely empowered STB for our region with responsibilities and devolved

powers to effectively join up transport policy, regulation and investment and provide clear, strategic investment priorities which will improve connectivity into and across the region, boost the economy and improve the lives of millions.

This is an officer response. The TfSE Shadow Partnership Board meets on 28 January 2021 and will consider the draft response and a further iteration of this response may therefore follow.

Yours sincerely,

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Lead Officer, Transport for the South East