

Report to: **Partnership Board –Transport for the South East**

Date of meeting: **13 May 2024**

By: **Chief Officer, Transport for the South East**

Title of report: **Centre of Excellence**

Purpose of report: **To provide an update on work to deliver and launch TfSE’s Centre of Excellence.**

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***RECOMMENDATIONS:***

**The members of the Partnership Board are recommended to:**

- (1) Note the progress of the Centre of Excellence development.
  - (2) Agree the launch of the Centre of Excellence site, including the planned event.
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**1. Introduction**

1.1 This report outlines the progress of Transport for the South East’s (TfSE) Centre of Excellence (CoE) and seeks Board’s approval for its formal launch in June 2024.

**2. Background**

2.1 In February 2022, the Levelling Up White Paper set out proposals for Regional Centres of Excellence to be established. Subsequently, the Department for Transport (DfT) have set out expectations that Sub-national Transport Bodies (STBs) take responsibility for developing and operating Centres of Excellence in their region, to provide bespoke support to Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) to help them deliver ‘clear project pipelines and comprehensive strategies to improve local transport for people and reduce carbon emissions’.

2.2 Once live, users will be able to benefit from a wide range of solutions to help improve their capacity and capability and support the DfT in delivering their four objectives.

The Centre of Excellence will support LTAs in:

- Developing effective business cases
- Developing and maintaining an effective pipeline of schemes
- Reducing the environmental impact of transport
- Updating Local Transport Plans

**3. Technical Call Off Contract**

3.1 At 3 July 2023 Partnership Board meeting, it was agreed that the consortium bid of Steer and its supply chain partners would be awarded the contract of work. In August 2023, Arup were appointed as the consultancy resource for the Centre of Excellence.

#### **4. Centre of Excellence Progress Update**

4.1 The CoE project consists of five separate Tasks. Task 1 to confirm Alignment and Prioritisation was completed end of September, and Task 2 to complete detailed Planning and Engagement was delivered at the end of December 2023. This included delivery of summary report outlining details of all findings from engagement to date and a management plan, outlining how the future CoE will be managed at a high level. Task 3 saw the build and testing of the website, and concluded on 24 April 2024.

#### **5. Governance**

5.1 One of the key tasks for the set up of a CoE was to establish a governance structure. The desire for the CoE to be co-designed with LTAs and DfT has been possible through this governance arrangement, to ensure that the content is appropriate, supported and makes good use of the existing tools and guidance available at a national and local level.

5.2 A Steering Group was established in December 2023, and has been integral in shaping the site's development. Through engagement with the group, we have been able to decide the functionality and components and prioritise the way in which skills gaps and their relevant solutions are developed and published. LTAs have also inputted to the content, through the provision of case studies, images, and users.

#### **6. Stakeholder engagement**

6.1 At the workshop with LTAs held on 11 September 2023, attendees were asked if users of the platform should go beyond officers within the authorities. It was agreed that academics, national agencies, and professional institutes should be engaged with, to seek their support and involvement.

6.2 To date, we have met with several professional institutes, including The Civil Engineering Contractors Association (CECA), The Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation (CIHT), Transport Planning Society (TPS), and the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE). All have agreed to become Tier 2 access users, which means they will see a restricted version of the site and have agreed that they would be able to provide input to the site in terms of resources.

6.3 TfSE hosted a Regional Universities meeting, to understand their level of support for our CoE, and what they may be able to input in terms of their capacity and capability. A survey was then issued to all members of the group, to understand what skills they have that would be of benefit for the platform, and to explore joint funding projects. Currently, University of Southampton, University of Surrey, University of Kent, and University of Canterbury have all committed their support, and have shared their assets with us for publication on the site.

6.4 Engagement has also taken place with National Highways, Network Rail, and Active Travel England. Work is underway to enhance the partnership, and to share case studies and provide future training and/or resources.

A survey went out to the 70 registered users of the CoE to understand the existing and target level of capability. This will help us prioritise and develop a pipeline of content to support with the identified skills gaps. This went live on 5 April for two weeks and saw 29 responses. Results so far are showing that 'Business case development' and 'National plans and guidance' are top skills to focus on and the skill with the biggest gap in terms of existing vs target capability is the 'Use of AI in transport planning'.

6.5 The findings from the recent survey will be used to onboard subject matter experts, so that solutions can begin to be developed and delivered in time for the launch of the site. Preferred solutions can range from webinars, bespoke guidance, training sessions, and tools.

6.6 This survey will be used annually, to continue to inform the pipeline of content and support. The results will be used to inform our KPIs.

## **7. Management of the platform**

7.1 The initial CoE's operating processes and principles have been set out in the Management Plan. This includes: outline of processes that will need to be covered throughout the different stages (Stage 1 - Planning, Stage 2 – Launch, Stage 3 – Initial Management, Stage 4 - Long-term management) such as sponsorship, platform development, managing and uploading content, running training, events and physical collaboration, communications and promotion, monitoring usage and KPIs, and Stakeholder engagement and governance and capturing user needs.

7.2 The management plan also includes details of: staff roles and responsibilities, communications and engagement, data strategy, partnership approach and engagement and success measurement (Key Performance Indicators).

7.3 The full management plan can be shared upon request.

## **8. Launch event**

8.1 We will host a launch event from 09:00-11:30 on 18 June, at the Department for Transport's head office in Westminster, Great Minster House. Partnership Board and Senior Officers will be invited to attend the launch, alongside all users of the Centre of the Excellence platform.

8.2 The purpose of the launch is to build momentum for the platform, raise awareness within the sector (including with partner organisations, such as universities and professional institutes such as CIHT) and to help demonstrate the value of the platform to the Department for Transport, who have funded the Centre of Excellence.

8.3 We hope that the launch will feature a talk from a Department for Transport Minister, or senior official, to demonstrate their support and buy-in for the Centre of Excellence. We would invite the Minister, or senior official, to a meeting with the Partnership Board following the launch, to maximise the value for Board members.

Members would then be invited to attend a Transport Strategy Refresh workshop, held in the same venue.

8.4 Whilst Board members meet with DfT, the users of the site would be invited to a separate training session for the remainder of the day. This would train users on how to use the Centre of Excellence and give them additional training on areas of importance, such as business planning and carbon reductions. All registered users from each authority would be invited to attend the launch and training session. However, we recognise that this may not be feasible for each authority, given financial constraints.

8.5 We engaged with Senior Officers Group on the plan for the launch event on 29 April and this plan has been updated following their feedback, so that it maximises value for Board members and officers who will attend. We will not host a Connecting the South East event in 2024, to minimise travel costs for Local Authorities, as we hope to maximise attendance for the Centre of Excellence Launch and Training Event.

## **9. Fiscal benefits**

9.1 A key ambition of the Centre of Excellence is to deliver economies of scale, through sharing of resources and best practice to create consistency and remove duplication. We are working with all STBs to understand what is available for us to signpost to and what they will be developing in future that will be of benefit to our local transport authorities but doesn't come with an additional cost to us. This demonstrates our conscientious attitude towards taxpayers' money and making best use of existing resources.

9.2 One of our key performance indicators will be to measure the cost savings for local authorities as a result of the centre of excellence. These could include the provision of licences, reduction in training costs, access to expertise, and knowledge sharing, to name a few. This will be reported on and presented to the Audit and Governance Committee.

## **10. Conclusions**

10.1 Extensive engagement has happened via surveys, workshops, and governance, to ensure that the CoE is delivered in line with LTAs expectations, needs and requirements. Further engagement has taken place with external partners to secure their support and involvement to the platform.

10.2 The survey that was issued to LTAs in April identified that top focus skills are business case development and national plans and guidance, which will be prioritised and developed by subject matter experts (SMEs).

10.3 Board Members are recommended to note the progress of the project, and agree the launch of the Centre of Excellence, and its associated launch event plan.

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