

Agenda Item 15

Report to: Partnership Board –Transport for the South East

Date of meeting: 17 March 2025

By: Co-Chairs, Business Advisory Group

Title of report: Business Advisory Group

Purpose of report: To update the Partnership Board on the recent work of the Business Advisory Group

RECOMMENDATION:

The members of the Partnership Board are recommended to review and comment on the recent work of the Business Advisory Group.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Business Advisory Group (BAG) was formed in October 2024. It is co-chaired by Vince Lucas and Daniel Ruiz. The group provides a business voice to support, advise and contribute to the Partnership Board.

2. Business Advisory Group – recent meetings

2.1 The BAG met on Wednesday 18 June virtually.

2.2 The BAG received an update on TfSE activity that has taken place since our last meeting, including the announcement of DfT funding for 2025/26, and the conclusion of Transport Strategy consultation. The Business Advisory Group heard about TfSE's Business Plan for 2025/26, including plans the develop of a Rail Strategy, refresh the Strategic Investment Plan, and develop a model for funding and financing the A27.

3. Business Advisory Group – Progress

3.1 Since forming in October 2024, TfSE's Business Advisory Group has identified and made progress on a number of issues, including:

- Facilitating a case study on hydrogen buses, which was hosted on TfSE's Centre of Excellence.
- Beginning exploratory work on rural connectivity, in collaboration with Transport East, who are currently developing a strong evidence base, with this challenge to be a key focus at the upcoming Business Summit.

- Supporting the Western Rail Link to Heathrow by contributing funding to a case study and participating in the working group.
- Engaging with Great Western Railway (GWR) on electrification of the North Downs Route, including sending formal support for the initiative.
- Funding initial work to support improvements to Isle of Wight ferry services.
- Joining up discussions on access to international rail links, to try to progress this issue.

4. Business Summit

4.1 As set out within the Terms of Reference the Business Advisory Group will come together in person at least once a year, at an in-person event where senior figures from the wider business community will be invited. The first meeting of this kind, TfSE's Business Summit, took place in Guildford on Wednesday 9 July.

4.2 The Business Summit was a success, with over fifty business stakeholders in attendance, from a wide range of sectors, and parts of the TfSE region.

4.3 The Business Summit sought business views' on tackling three key challenges that have been identified by the Business Advisory Group:

- Rural Transport
- Energy Availability
- Access to International Connectivity

4.4 More details about the Business Summit, and the initial outputs from the day, are set out in **Appendix 1**. Initial feedback from attendees was that TfSE have a key role to play in allowing businesses to speak on these issues and building an evidence base and consensus on changes that need to be made.

4.5 TfSE will draft a report for Government, setting out businesses' asks in this area, which will be brought to an upcoming Partnership Board.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 The Partnership Board is recommended to note the progress of the Business Advisory Group.

Daniel Ruiz and Vince Lucas
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Transport for the South East

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Appendix 1 – TfSE Business Summit – Initial Outputs

TfSE Business Summit, Guildford, 9 July 2025

Following the Summit, the Business Advisory Group will produce a report for Government, which will go to Board for sign-off. This appendix aims to give the Board an initial summary of the day.

Attendance

- The Business Summit was attended by over 50 senior business stakeholders, including construction companies, technology companies, and creative industries, as well as transport operators, who TfSE engage with more regularly.
- TfSE purposefully sought a diverse audience of business stakeholders and focused on the eight sectors that the government has identified as high potential in the recent industrial strategy.
- The event was also attended by TfSE Board Members, Cllr Dennis and Cllr Bowerman.

Structure

- The day was introduced and closed by Vince Lucas and Daniel Ruiz, Business Advisory Group Co-Chairs, as well as Rupert Clubb, TfSE's Chief Officer.
- The day focused on three workshops, asking business stakeholders to identify solutions to three top transport-related challenges that have been identified by the Business Advisory Group:
 - Access to International Connectivity
 - Energy Availability
 - Rural Transport
- We were pleased to have two industry experts facilitating the sessions:
 - Access to International Connectivity was facilitated by Ruth Bagley, Chair of the Western Rail Link to Heathrow Group, and Member of the British Chamber of Commerce's Infrastructure Policy Group.
 - Energy Availability was facilitated by Dr Phil Evans, an independent consultant with experience as a Director at Capita, focusing on transport and energy, and a former Chair of Tech UK's Intelligent Mobility and Transport Steering Board.

Initial Outputs

- The consistent call from business stakeholders was that TfSE's Business Summit was filling a gap, that has been there since the dissolution of LEPs.

- Stakeholders said that TfSE should have a key role in helping to bring out the business voice on these issues and building an evidence base and consensus on changes that need to be made.
- It was acknowledged that TfSE is uniquely positioned to act as a thought leader for the region, as it brings together a coalition of local authorities, business leaders, transport providers, and communities who are closer to the South East's distinct challenges and opportunities than central government – it was noted there was no other equivalent body that could do this.
- While government provides funding and policy direction, TfSE has the credibility, local intelligence, and convening power to shape the long-term vision. By stepping up as a thought leader, TfSE can ensure the region speaks with one voice, challenges outdated assumptions, and secures the integrated investment needed to deliver genuinely transformative transport outcomes.
- A number of stakeholders said that the South East lacks a clear, unified identity when it comes to transport and place-based investment often overshadowed by the London or misunderstood as uniformly affluent.
- There was a call for a distinct regional brand, championed by TfSE, to help change this narrative. Much like Transport for the North has done in articulating a shared northern voice, TfSE is well placed to define and promote what the South East stands for: a complex and diverse region encompassing global gateways, rural communities, high-growth corridors, and coastal economies – and that this brand must deliberately distinguish the South East from London, recognising that the region's infrastructure, funding needs, and growth pressures are fundamentally different.

Workshop Outputs

- **Access to International Connectivity** – Participants agreed that the South East have exceptional international connectivity, and that it is one of our key strengths as a region, but that to maximise this advantage, we need to ensure access to international connectivity is strengthened, with more reliable road connections, and more options to travel to international gateways by rail. Participants felt that TfSE have a key role in making the case for funding for these improvements, to maximise economic growth and opportunities for business. Participants felt that TfSE should focus on work to unlock private financing and funding for road and rail improvements, given government funding constraints.
- **Energy Availability** – One of the strongest messages to emerge from the workshop was the clear interdependence between energy and transport strategies. Participants emphasised that it is increasingly difficult and counterproductive to separate the two. Whether it's the availability of EV charging infrastructure, the future of hydrogen for freight, or the resilience of the electricity grid to support decarbonised public transport, energy and

transport decisions must now be made in tandem. TfSE is well positioned to take a leading role in this space, acting as a regional convenor across transport, energy, planning and industry. By promoting a whole-systems approach to decarbonisation encompassing electricity, hydrogen, digital, and modal shift

- **Rural transport** – This was acknowledged as one of the trickiest issues to address, given overall funding constraints. However, businesses recognised the contribution that the rural economy makes to the South East's GDP. Stakeholders explored a number of solutions to make the most of the transport capacity that already exists in rural areas, to better connect people to employment and tourism, including through the use of technology. TfSE has a key role in developing potential policy solutions and a stronger evidence about rural issues, and submitting this to government, as Transport East have done in their region.

Next Steps

- TfSE will collate all the evidence from the day, to prepare a report on "Transport Asks for Government" that will be reviewed by the Business Advisory Group, and will then go to Partnership Board, before submission to government.
- TfSE will also request for feedback from attendees and will use this to inform plans for the next Business Summit, and plans to further engage with the business community, and make it integral to the work we undertake.