

Subject:	Greater Brighton Strategic Workplan 2025/26		
Date of Meeting:	2 April 2025		
Report of:	Chair, Greater Brighton Officer Programme Board		
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Ward(s) affected:	All		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE**1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND POLICY CONTEXT**

- 1.1 On 16 December 2024, the Government published its English Devolution White Paper, setting out its ambition for devolution to all areas of England and inviting applications from areas to join the Devolution Priority Programme. The leaders of East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton & Hove applied for Sussex, and in early February Sussex and Brighton was confirmed as one of six regions to be accepted on to the Programme. Being on the Priority Programme means that Sussex and Brighton will be working to the most ambitious timetable for devolution, including the establishment of a Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) over the next 12 months and the first Mayoral elections expected in May 2026.
- 1.2 The Greater Brighton Economic Board welcomes the Government recognition of the opportunities available from working at a larger, regional level for strategic initiatives. With the formation of a Sussex and Brighton MCCA in progress and governance structures not yet defined, it is not yet clear on the form that the Greater Brighton Economic Board and other existing governance structures will take beyond the end of 2025/26. This will become clearer through time.
- 1.3 Since its inception in 2014, the Board has championed collaborative working across the sub-region, established a wide range of partnerships and networks, and provided strategic leadership around key issues - the launch of the Sussex Energy Mission in July 2024 is a recent example. It has been a unique space where Districts, Boroughs, businesses, further and higher education institutions across East and West Sussex and Brighton & Hove work collaboratively and openly, and member organisations have agreed that this important forum will continue through 2025/26. The Board boasts a lot of experience and expertise in sustainable economic prosperity and is therefore well placed to support MHCLG and other Government departments as work to establish the MCCA progresses. Organisations that sit on the Board are open to being involved in future governance structures.
- 1.4 Paragraphs 3.1-3.14 of this report provide a summary of the Board's experience, successes and current priorities. Paragraphs 3.19-3.40 provides an overview of the Board's 2025/26 proposed work programme.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That the Board commissions an independent study to review the economic opportunities for the region, in cooperation with the respective growth boards of the three upper tiers, fully considering the enhanced strategic powers, capability and perspective of the MCCA.
- 2.2 That the Board supports the proposed 2025/26 work programme priorities outlined in 3.19-3.40 to focus on three areas of competence with a devolved region lens: Environment and climate change, Economic development and regeneration, and Transport and infrastructure.
- 2.3 That the Board acknowledges that we are entering a transition period, with significant changes expected within a short timeframe, meaning that there needs to be some fluidity and adaptability within the work plan.

3. CONTEXT/ BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Greater Brighton Economic Board Priorities and Achievements

- 3.1 The Board was established through the Greater Brighton City Deal with Government in 2014. The main remit of the Board is to help nurture sustainable economic prosperity, by co-ordinating economic development activities and investment at City Region level, and by joining together places and working collaboratively to build on the area's economic assets and unblock its barriers. In bringing together, in a partnership of the willing, seven local authorities, business partnerships, two universities, a college group, a National Park, and recently NHS Sussex, the Board has occupied a unique position within the local governance landscape.
- 3.2 Through the Greater Brighton City Deal Agreement, the Board created the Greater Brighton Investment Programme. Since 2014, over £160m of Local Growth Funding has been secured which has unlocked around £2bn of private sector investment, created 24,000 jobs, built 18,000 homes and delivered 750,000m² of employment floor space.
- 3.3 The Investment Programme was designed to deliver sustainable economic prosperity by unlocking sites, developing infrastructure and creating space and support for high-value businesses to start-up and grow and thereby reduce reliance on lower-value industries. The Investment Programme contained a number of projects which varied in both their geography and type, including £48m secured through Housing & Infrastructure Fund to unlock 6,000 new homes and in July 2018 Homes England announced that it had purchased 176 hectares in Burgess Hill to unlock the delivery of 3,500 homes at Brookleigh.
- 3.4 As some of the early projects started in 2015, most completed the delivery phase some time ago. These include the Advanced Engineering Centre at the University of Brighton, flood defences in Newhaven, the Construction Trades Centre at Greater Brighton Metropolitan College, the BTN BikeShare scheme, Plus X, Circus Street and the Adur Tidal Walls flood defences in Shoreham.

- 3.5 While still in its 'infancy', the Board made enormous progress in creating a strong brand that is recognised by Government, investors and key stakeholders. It is a united partnership that has a detailed understanding of its functional economic area (and the barriers and challenges to increased productivity) and has the ability to shape priorities and target interventions across the City Region.
- 3.6 As well as being noticed by Government, the Board has also grown in standing and reputation at a more local level. Crawley and Arun were not original members of the Board but joined in 2018 and 2019 respectively. NHS Sussex Integrated Care Board joined at the start of 2025.
- 3.7 With sustainable economic prosperity being the main focus of the Board, through 2018 and 2019 whilst climate emergencies were declared locally and nationally, the environmental and economic resilience theme became more prominent in the Board's thinking. This was a few years ahead of the Covid-19 pandemic, so the Board was ahead of the curve when identifying economic resilience as a key priority.
- 3.8 In 2018 the Greater Brighton Infrastructure Panel was established to oversee development of ambitious energy and water plans, and also review the security and resilience of infrastructure in a wider sense. In the summer of 2020, Board Members agreed 10 pledges on the environment, to accelerate the region towards net zero. Since then, the highly successful Hydrogen Sussex, which launched in February 2021 and span-out of the Infrastructure Panel, has quickly gained national traction. At the February 2022 Board Meeting the Board agreed to contribute £25k to support the development of a Hydrogen Strategy for the region, and this was published in February of 2023. The strategy aims to develop hydrogen as a source of clean energy, support decarbonisation and attract investment to the region. With the right collaboration and action the region has real potential to establish a 'hydrogen hub', which would put the region at the forefront of a hydrogen fuel revolution.
- 3.9 The Board's commitment to sustainable economic prosperity and transitioning to net zero has become more critical than ever. Real progress has been made in several areas, but with so many strands of work and activity going on in relation to climate change and sustainability there existed huge potential to maximise opportunities for environmental action and collaboration across the city region.
- 3.10 To that end, in July 2024 the Board launched the Sussex Energy Mission, an ambition for Sussex to increase the amount of zero-carbon energy produced in the region and at the same time reduce the demand for energy, so that the Sussex region achieves energy neutrality by 2040. This Mission resonates with people because it drives a lot of levers; it contributes to the net zero carbon goal to address urgent climate concerns, it builds on a strong track record in Sussex of low carbon energy work, it tackles the cost-of-living challenge, improves energy security, drives demand for green skills, drives economic growth and advances Government priorities.
- 3.11 However, for it to succeed, Sussex Energy requires pan Sussex collaboration between the public sector, businesses, community groups, skills providers and energy sector stakeholders to ensure a just, sustainable, and economically viable

transition to energy neutrality. Many benefits can be gained from collaboration. Efficiencies can be gained from sharing knowledge, experience and future endeavours. Pipelines of low carbon energy work across Sussex can be coordinated providing certainty and demand to spur on a pipeline of green skills. The effort and cost of solutions and services can be shared and economies of scale can accelerate the energy transition. Sussex Energy can achieve more than the sum of its parts by presenting a unified narrative rather than highlighting its individual projects separately.

- 3.12 To progress the collaborative mission, a Steering Group is materialising with representation from across Sussex and across sectors. A forum is growing to allow co-creation of the mission with a large group of net zero practitioners from a range of organisations. A roadmap to 2040 has been drafted showing the ambition is to firstly tackle strategic system interventions to help accelerate existing low carbon energy work being rolled out in Sussex. This will be addressing challenges existing projects face through measures such as spreading best practice and amending processes. By showing success at these, it demonstrates the right people are working together to provide confidence to potential investors and it helps develop working relationships to build on by moving on to collaboratively delivering scaled solutions.
- 3.13 Food system vulnerabilities were revealed through the Covid-19 pandemic and rising prices of food have helped to fuel the recent cost-of-living crisis. The Board has agreed to the development of a regional food plan that would look to address these challenges and help to support and build a sustainable and climate resilient economy. This work is currently well in train, with a food scoping and food investment plan completed and the food plan due to be complete later in 2025.
- 3.14 The creative industries are a crucial sector in the region and a Creative Industries Vision for Greater Brighton and Coastal West Sussex is currently in the final stages of review. The aim of the vision is to determine what targeted support and interventions are required to sustain and grow the sector. This will drive growth and generate economic value for the wider area and sector. This vision outlines why the Creative Industries are important, particularly in the context of the Government placing the creative industries at the centre of its growth ambitions; first appearing in the launch of an ambitious national strategy for the sector in March 2024 and then in Invest 2035 which highlights the important role of the sector in driving growth across regions and nations.

Transitioning to a Sussex and Brighton Mayoral Combined County Authority

- 3.15 The forthcoming English Devolution Bill will create a statutory requirement for all Mayoral Strategic Authorities to produce a Local Growth Plan which sets out a long-term vision for growth in their region over the next decade and a roadmap for how this can be achieved. Established governance structures such as the Board, and East and West Sussex Growth Boards, and the Brighton & Hove Growth Board, have a detailed understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing residents and businesses. The Board remains open to sharing experience, expertise and good practice with other governance structures to ensure that this knowledge is transferred to the MCCA.

- 3.16 Strategic Authorities will have a defined list of 'Areas of Competence', set out in law. These are designed to strengthen, not detract from, the functions and roles of other public bodies, such as NHS England, Environment Agency or Local Authorities. Proposed Areas of Competence include;
- Transport & local infrastructure
 - Skills & employment support
 - Housing & strategic planning
 - Economic development & regeneration
 - Environment & climate change
 - Health, wellbeing & public service reform
 - Public safety
- 3.17 Thus far the Board has been able to add great value and demonstrate competence in the areas of Economic development & regeneration and Environment & climate change. Transport and local infrastructure are key enablers of economic growth; high quality transport infrastructure supports growth and opportunity. Infrastructure will also be fundamental to realising the Sussex Energy Mission, and decarbonising transport will be a key component of the Mission.
- 3.18 The following section outlines proposed the 2025/26 work programme priorities for the Board. Sustainable economic prosperity is considered within the three areas of competence outlined above, and with very much a devolved region lens. The pace of change over the next 12 months is going to be rapid, so the Board will need to remain agile and keep the proposed workplan under review.

Economic development & regeneration

- 3.19 The Greater Brighton economy generates around £28bn in gross value added (GVA). The economy is diverse, with activity across a high number of sectors. Specialisms include several types of manufacturing (computer/electronics, pharma, electrical) human health, air transport, creative & arts. The city region is made up from predominantly micro businesses with around 90% of businesses having less than 10 employees. Large businesses (250+ employees) make up less than 1% of the business base.
- 3.20 In terms of Culture, Heritage, Sport and the Visitor Economy, Government will work with Mayors and local authorities to devolve levers of growth in these sectors. Sussex welcomes 62 million visitors annually and the visitor economy in Sussex is worth £5 billion GVA. It is a major employer that supports 74,000 jobs (equivalent to 14% of all employment versus the England average of 11%). The Visitor Economy is also a key enabler; supporting high-growth sectors, creating jobs, and enhancing place-making.
- 3.21 The established Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP) recently published the Visitor Economy Strategy for Growth 2024 – 2034. The development of the Strategy for Growth underscores the region's commitment to the devolution agenda. It highlights the strength of the existing public-private sector collaboration and amplifies a unified 'one regional voice', highlighting the importance of the visitor economy, and the need to drive forward the area's economic ambitions.

- 3.22 The goal of the emerging Creative Industries Vision is to realise the potential that this region clearly has to become home to a world-class Creative Industries sector. The region can be the best place in the UK for anyone, whatever their background, to build a fulfilling career in the Creative Industries.
- 3.23 The vision is to be the best place in the UK at nurturing Creative Industry talent. Creative businesses in the region need to be able to compete effectively and to scale-up their enterprises, creating and safeguarding employment. There is a need to ensure people from every town and every community get an opportunity to develop their capabilities to the full.
- 3.24 At a time when resources everywhere are limited, it is more important than ever that we coordinate our Creative Industries support effectively and existing regional assets are leveraged for the benefit of the sector and our communities – helping to address geographic inequalities and deliver sustainable economic prosperity. By articulating a vision to create the right scale and identity for supporting our creative and cultural industries we can meet the identity, ambition and evolution of these innovative sectors to support local progressive missions.
- 3.25 This region already has many of the resources, organisations and infrastructure that are needed to build a successful Creative Industries sector. However, they often go unrecognised, are unevenly distributed and not sufficiently coordinated. The vision document examines how we might leverage these existing assets in a much more effective way and support additional initiatives that will help that to happen. The vision sets out the approach, ambition and some essential priority areas. The next step in taking the vision forward is to review it in the context of a wider, devolved region and prepare a resource plan for future activity.

Environment and climate change

- 3.26 The work described in 3.8-3.13 above demonstrates that creating sustainable economic prosperity is a long-standing strategic priority for the Board. Greater Brighton partners and Sussex organisations are ambitious and innovative in striving to achieve carbon reduction targets. Whilst there was much good work going on across the region, there was a need for a step-change in the level of ambition and activity.
- 3.27 Current baseline data suggests that both Greater Brighton and wider Sussex areas are significant net importers of energy. Current energy demand for heating buildings, fuelling vehicles and supplying electricity to homes and businesses greatly exceeds the current supply of energy from renewable sources across Greater Brighton and wider Sussex region. If the region is to transition to net zero-carbon ahead of the UK target, and to achieve a level of energy resilience and security, this needs to be adjusted.
- 3.28 The Board is able to use its convening powers and influence to take a leadership role across the Sussex region in addressing the huge differential between demand and supply, so the Sussex Energy Mission was launched in July 2024. The aspiration is to transform our community into a model of sustainability and resilience, where every home, business, and public space thrives on 100% zero-carbon, affordable energy, fostering a healthier environment, robust economy, a strong demand and supply of green skills, and equitable society for all. Energy

created within the community will be retained with local people benefitting directly from this energy production thereby significantly reducing the carbon footprint, reducing reliance on imported energy and contributing to the global fight against climate change.

- 3.29 The summer of 2024 also saw the launch of the Sussex Bay Partnership. Sussex Bay presents an exciting vision which hopes to see 100 miles of local coastline flourish. It has designed and implemented the UK's first Blue Natural Capital (BNC) Lab, with the aim of building high-integrity, sustainable investment models to enable seascape restoration at scale. Its mission is to generate a £50 million fund by 2050 to accelerate local seascape recovery that benefits nature, people and business.
- 3.30 The aspiration of Sussex Bay is to extend marine restoration into coastal communities and the intertidal zones of the Sussex river catchments, wetlands and saltmarshes that support nature and people to thrive. Sussex Bay is supporting a number of projects, with the immediate priority being to support nature's recovery, and optimising the positive impact this has on people's lives and livelihoods, because as nature recovers, people and the coastal economy will benefit too; from sustainable fisheries to enhanced health and wellbeing, and new commercial opportunities in ecotourism and leisure.
- 3.31 The Living Coast Biosphere was designated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in 2014. The designation recognises both the region's outstanding natural environments and capacity to foster cross-sectoral cooperation for excellence in sustainable economic prosperity. It is both a spatial designation with national and international recognition, and a local partnership with over 40 different organisations encompassing businesses, conservation, education, voluntary, and local government partners.
- 3.32 The Living Coast Biosphere is part of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves, aiming to be sites of excellence for sustainable economic prosperity through:
- Conservation of biodiversity and cultural diversity;
 - Economic development that is socio-culturally and environmentally sustainable
 - Knowledge sharing underpinning development through Education, training, research and data.
- 3.33 The interdisciplinary cooperation between people and organisations has brought together real and tangible work that positively impacts the regional environment and communities, in relation to habitats, biodiversity, carbon reduction, climate, food production and distribution, and arts and cultural benefits for the people who live and work within the Biosphere boundary and wider Sussex area.
- 3.34 Always collaborative, The Living Coast has an important role to play in bringing together the organisations that are instigators and collaborators in the vital actions that we all need to take whatever our roles and responsibilities. The backing of the UNESCO designation is important in bringing extra leverage to support, develop and expand these actions.

- 3.35 Every ten years UNESCO requires biospheres to take stock of the work that has been delivered and to consult all local stakeholders to shape the future strategy, leading to an official renewal of the designation. In 2023 the Board agreed to provide £10,000 of funding to support the redesignation work and this work was completed as per the deadline of September 2024 set by UNESCO.
- 3.36 The Sussex Nature Partnership (SxNP), established in 2014, is a voluntary partnership of over 30 organisations across East and West Sussex, Brighton & Hove working collaboratively to conserve, enhance, and expand Sussex's natural capital, ensuring residents benefit from healthy ecosystems. They have strands of work on the protection and improvement of the natural capital in Sussex (i.e. elements of nature that produce value to people), the green economy, nature's role in climate change mitigation and adaptation, and health and wellbeing. They run a Local Authority Network to allow local authorities to connect with the work of Sussex Nature Partnership and to provide access to information and resources, and to promote knowledge, experience and best practice sharing. They are part of the South East Nature Partnership, collaborating across the region on common priorities.
- 3.37 There are clear synergies and overlaps between the priorities and objectives of Sussex Energy, Sussex Bay, the Living Coast and the Sussex Nature Partnership. By collating these programmes under a regional Environment and Climate Change theme, strategic oversight can unlock significant opportunities for cross-fertilisation, efficiency gains, and the development of joint solutions and pathways. As part of the 2025/26 proposed work programme for the Board, one strand of Sussex Energy would be reviewing how Environment and climate change would look at a Strategic Authority level, incorporating other relevant programmes.

Transport & local infrastructure

- 3.38 Sussex benefits from some well-established transport links, including major roads like the A23 and A27, and rail connections like the Brighton Mainline, which are crucial for regional connectivity. However, there is scope for improvement, particularly in reducing congestion on the region's roads and improving public transport frequency to reduce commute times and further environmental objectives. There is a need for the MCCA to work closely with the sub-regional transport body, Transport for the South East, to ensure an improvement plan is agreed that delivers maximum benefit for residents and businesses.
- 3.39 Being home to the UK's second largest airport, and several ports including Shoreham and Newhaven, Sussex also has very strong international gateways to Europe and beyond. These assets make Sussex the best internationally connected part of the south east outside of London, and this is a major strength of this region, in terms of the potential for trade, inward investment, business travel and the visitor economy.
- 3.40 However, there is currently a lack of co-ordination across these international gateways and there exists opportunities to be more joined up to maximise the benefits they can deliver for the region. A strategic review of these gateways would be beneficial to understand how they can better serve Sussex residents,

businesses and visitors to the region and how they can attract inwards investment, drive economic growth across the region and act as partners in delivering the Sussex Energy Mission.

Skills

- 3.41 Skills cut across the three competencies highlighted above; for the region to have a world-class creative industries sector, there is a need to nurture and retain the talent locally. To achieve the Sussex Energy Mission there will be a huge demand for a wide array of green skills. Sussex has a progressive and highly collaborative FE sector, and three leading universities. There are well established HE and FE partnerships and networks with solid links to employers. The Local Skills Improvement Plan, developed by a wide collaboration, and led by Sussex Chamber of Commerce, is seen as an exemplar. The region is, therefore, very much on the front-foot for when skills budgets are devolved to the MCCA. Existing partnerships and pathways mean that funding can be targeted at the right places so end-users would see the benefits very quickly.

4 ANALYSIS & CONSIDERATION OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 4.1 The Sussex & Brighton region has been accepted on to the Devolution Priority Programme meaning that in accordance with the latest Government timeframes, an MCCA will be established by spring 2026 and Mayoral elections taking place in May 2026. It is important that the work of the Board over the next 12 is framed within the context of devolution so that the Board remains an important, proactive and relevant governance structure through the transition period, and that strands of work, including Sussex Energy, continue into the future
- 4.2 A do nothing or reactive approach to devolution risks the Board losing relevance and credibility, which would reduce the influence the Board may have over shaping future outcomes. This paper assumes there will be structures established under the MCCA by March 2026 that could transition Greater Brighton Economic Board programmes if they have been identified as a priority. If this is not the case, delivery continuity is at risk. To mitigate this risk, the Board will aim to keep close to developments in the MCCA and be open to being adaptive.

5 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & CONSULTATION

- 5.1 There is no direct community engagement or consultation arising directly from this paper. However, some of the strands of work highlighted in this paper have or will involve community engagement and consultation. For example, the Creative Industries Vision has involved engagement with businesses in the sector and community engagement and participation is an important aspect of the Sussex Energy Mission.

6 CONCLUSION

- 6.1 As noted previously, the Sussex & Brighton region is on the Devolution Priority Programme, which means that future of existing governance structures is unclear once the MCCA is established. It's important that the Board's work programme for 2025/26 acknowledges that we are entering a transition period, with significant

changes expected within short timeframe, and that the workplan is framed within this context.

- 6.2 The Board adds value as a unique convenor of local authorities and business partners. Its experience gathered over the last 10 years mean that it is in a prime position to offer support to MHCLG and other Government departments as work to establish the MCCA progresses. The Board can also add value by commissioning an independent study to review the economic opportunities for the region.

7. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

Financial Implications:

- 7.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. The delivery of the strategic workplan will be funded through the Board's proposed operational budget as outlined in the Operational Arrangements 2025/26 report, also on this agenda.

Finance Officer Consulted: Haley Woollard
Date: 24/03/2025

Legal Implications:

- 7.2 There are no direct legal implications arising from the recommendations in this report,

Lawyer Consulted: Siobhan Fry – Head of Legal (Commercial)
Date: 24/03/2025

Equalities Implications:

- 7.3 None directly arising from this report.

Sustainability Implications

- 7.4 None directly arising from this report.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Appendices:

None

Background Documents:

None.