

MAAs... the story so far

When they were launched in July, multi-area agreements (MAAs) were hailed by the LGA as having the potential to lead to “genuine devolution of powers and funding” to local authorities. **Deborah Lewis** looks at whether progress made so far is fulfilling that potential.

MAAs, voluntary agreements between local authorities who enter a contract with central government, were first proposed in the local government white paper in October 2006 as a way of helping councils work with neighbours to promote economic development and tackle deprivation at a regional level.

The concept was not new, and most of the seven regions chosen to pilot the MAAs already had established partnerships between local authorities.

But the MAAs promised greater freedoms and flexibility from Whitehall in return for pledging a local partnership approach to economic growth. They bring together councils and key strategic partners to tackle issues best addressed at a regional and sub-regional level, working together across the artificial limits of council boundaries.

Tailor-made

They are designed to add value to the work of existing local area agreements (LAAs), but not duplicate them – no two MAAs will or should look the same, because they are tailored to specific economic circumstances.

The key issues MAAs tackle include skills deficits; housing; transport and infrastructure projects; and economic development.

The first seven MAAs are Tees Valley; Greater Manchester; South Yorkshire; Leeds city region; partnership for urban south Hampshire (PUSH); Bournemouth,

Dorset and Poole; and Tyne and Wear.

The chairman of PUSH, Cllr Sean Woodward, says that it is still “early days” for MAAs, but there are indications of how it will benefit the region.

Initially formed in 2003 with the partnering of Hampshire county council, unitaries Portsmouth and Southampton city councils and four district councils, PUSH expanded in 2004 to include all 11 local authorities in the region, to tackle economic challenges in South Hampshire, which has a lower gross value added (GVA) – the measure of economic output – than the rest of the South East.

In October 2006 it was selected by the government to be one of the 29 “new growth points” in England.

Cllr Woodward said: “We had already attracted a lot of attention for our cross-party partnership work across all types of council, and the MAA was the next step in the partnership’s development, but a positive one, because it means public bodies now have a statutory duty to co-operate with the goals.”

“We now have a formal joint committee with decision-making powers which holds meetings open to the public, whereas before it was more informal.”

Since the MAA, PUSH has started collaborating with external organisations including Business Link, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and Transport for South Hampshire.

“Closer collaboration is key,” says Cllr Woodward. “We have major traffic

congestion problems on the M27 and M3 motorways which we want to address. Historically, the Highways Agency would have dealt with the issue with little or no consultation with local authorities, but now we will be working on it with them.”

Stronger working links with the local business community is also an MAA benefit. “We have an ambitious target to raise South Hampshire’s GVA from 2.8% to 3.5% over a 20-year period,” says Cllr



Year 10 students try out new skills at the Dorset skills festival

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Woodward.

“We already have a successful business forum, but with the introduction of the MAA we are set to have a business representative on our joint committee to advise council leaders.”

Financial flexibility

Increased financial flexibility is the main advantage of the Tees Valley MAA, says John Lowther, director of the Tees Valley joint strategy unit.

The MAA, focusing on physical regeneration, transport and housing renewal and growth, has meant different budgets – from regional development agency One NorthEast, the Department of Transport and the Homes and Communities Agency – can be used more flexibly, to get money to the places that most need it.

The potential of MAAs to allow local partnerships to effectively tackle issues specific to their region is not in doubt.

But Cllr Woodward voiced a widespread concern that the current economic downturn will affect government funding.

“MAAs have the potential to improve working between central and local government, but only if government honours the financial commitment. Some money has come through, but these are major infrastructural changes we need, and that will cost around £4bn overall.”



Employer-led schemes are already reaping benefits in the Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole MAA, writes economic development manager Peter Wheelhouse.

A holistic approach has been adopted with a focus on five inter-connected themes – skills, business growth, environment, housing and transport. The MAA is employer-led and delivery is achieved through the work of five theme groups.

It is only four months since the MAA was signed but much progress has been made. There has been a particular focus on higher skills development and graduate retention. The STRIDE graduate placement programme led by Bournemouth University has signed up 80 employers, with 300 graduates and post-graduates currently taking part. As part of the MAA, the Higher Education Funding Council has agreed to work with partners to improve incentives available for small firms to fund training at the higher level.

Another objective is to address the preparedness of young people for the world of work. We staged a major skills festival involving over 100 exhibitors and 6,000 young people in October (pictured above). This is being followed up with a film clip on YouTube to raise the profile of local employment opportunities, and a mentoring programme involving 25

local businesses. An employability conference bringing together head teachers and employers is also planned for the spring.

An employer-led employment and skills board is being set up to lead on taking forward the MAA skills strategy, and, in the current climate, ensuring a co-ordinated response to the global economic downturn.

A major aim is to secure sustainable economic growth. We have tough targets to meet in CO₂ reductions and safeguarding the natural assets of the area is crucial to its economic success. The Environment Agency is currently working with partners to develop a model that can help assess the environmental impact of MAA programmes, which could benefit other MAA areas in due course.

Timeline

October 2006: Strong and prosperous communities – the local government white paper published. MAAs first proposed.

July 2007: Sub-national review signals further commitment to MAAs.

November 2007: Councils in first wave announced. Thirteen MAAs expected. Communities and Local Government guidance on LAAs and MAAs published.

July 2008: Initial wave signed, seven MAAs created.

September 2008: Talks for next wave start.